

# The God Insight: Vengeance or Destiny?

*John Bacon*

God preaches, a noted Clergyman –  
And the sermon is never long,  
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last –  
I'm going, all along.<sup>1</sup>

## Preface

For most of my life, I have pondered the meaning of the religion in which I was reared (Presbyterianism) and of its rivals (Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism and Judaism). The upshot of my old age is a virtually unheard-of religion, roughly in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which I call 'Ætism'. (It rhymes with 'elitism', minus the 'el-', and is derived from the Greek root meaning 'cause'.) This unlovely name is short for the virtually unpronounceable 'achristological ætiologism', which Demosthenes could no doubt have used to good effect in his speech practice on the beach. Ætism is not, to be sure, entirely new: its features have been anticipated and evaluated by other thinkers in the broadly Christian tradition. I'll try to describe Ætism as straightforwardly as I can, mindful of the virtues of brevity and simplicity on the one hand, and accuracy and thoroughness on the other. Basically, Ætism is a form of Unitarianism or gnosticism. It is Christianity minus the messiah, Judaism minus the personhood of God or Manichaeism minus the implacable duality of good and evil.

The presentation here is meant quite seriously. Having been raised as a species of Protestant, I attended church voluntarily and joyfully almost every Sunday until I was about 24. Since then, unlike many of my academic colleagues, I've always held religion to be of the first importance. I believe that religiosity, the impulse to spiritual clarity and fulfilment, is as essential to our humanity as our defining penchants for thinking and feeling, procreating and amassing possessions. Around the age of 24 or 25, like many post-adolescents,

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Dickinson *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed RW Franklin (Cambridge, 1999) 236.

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I began to have doubts. For a while, I said I was not atheist but agnostic. Later I came to the core of Ætistic belief: that the world exists and goes on for the sake of a 'final cause' (to employ the Aristotelian jargon), which is God. I haven't found very many to agree with me. (My philosophy colleagues assumed I had missed the lesson of Philosophy 101 where the notion of the final cause was shown to be systematically misleading and obsolete, at best a medieval superstition.) Under social pressure, I even came to doubt the final-cause hypothesis, which began to seem as wishy-washy to me as the anthropic hypothesis (lately made much of by weary scientists, in need of new paradoxes upon which to whet their over-trained minds). Maybe it's all just whirling fundamental particles, I thought, arranged into ever more evolved clusters of protoplasm. I thought tenderly of a wife and children so constituted. I have since thought long and hard about this; the summary here is the ultimate fruit of much whimpering in the wilderness. In particular, I'm concerned to work out whether God (if such there be) is a God of vengeance (as the Old Testament strongly suggests) or a God embodying our ultimate intelligible destiny. My answer is the latter.

My primary, and most controversial, aim is to scotch the preposterous belief in the redemption of man through the death of a messiah. This brings us closer to Judaism as well as to early para-Christian heresy. In fact, the doctrine of redemption through resurrection came comparatively late on the proto-Christian scene. To the earliest Jewish Christians, Jesus was a wonder-worker and messiah in the Old Testament sense. Such a messiah had no need of political execution and stagy resurrection in order to get about his task. The kerygmatic, resurrected Christ was rather a favourite of the early gentile Christians and received its decisive affirmation as a foundation stone of Christianity from the ever-busy St Paul. So in removing salvation by crucifixion from Christianity, Ætism is true to its roots in the early Jewish church. Jesus may have died on the cross: there's historical evidence for that. I hold that the significance of that injustice for us is metaphorical or allegorical: Jesus' death, supposedly for our benefit, is a metaphor for our natural (and probably false) conviction that God cares about us and is determined to help us if we adopt the right attitude. (Ætism leaves that issue open.) I've fast-forwarded to the

substantive issues in order to give you a foretaste of the unpalatable medicine to come. Now it's time to swallow the pill.

## **Meaning**

We can't get far in a would-be religious context without attending to the intuitively apprehensible condition of meaning or meaningfulness. I say 'intuitively apprehensible' to forestall the objection that we possess no such empirical faculty. I maintain that we do possess such a faculty, in addition to sense-perception, concept formation and reasoning. The most direct way to demonstrate this is to appeal to experiences that most of us have had. It is intuitively evident to many of us that the lives we lead are sometimes meaningful. The vulgar dig 'Get a life!' means 'Make your life meaningful (if you can, you nebbakh!)'. And I'm afraid it's lamentably evident to some that they lead practically meaningless lives.

These claims are best documented by examples drawn from literature. If the literature is well-crafted, the incidents described may reproduce the subtle weft of real life but in a possible world, as it were. The philosopher Richard Taylor, with an eye for the religious proclivity of man, gives simple, vivid examples of meaningful and meaningless lives in his book *Good and Evil*.<sup>2</sup> His example of a meaningless life is that of Sisyphus, who never gets anywhere pushing his stone uphill. Taylor writes:

Let us suppose that the gods, while condemning Sisyphus to the fate just described, at the same time, as an afterthought, waxed perversely merciful by implanting in him a strange and irrational impulse; namely, a compulsive impulse to roll stones. We may if we like, to make this more graphic, suppose they accomplish this by implanting in him some substance that has this effect on his character and drives ... However it may appear to us, Sisyphus' fate now does not appear as a condemnation, but the very reverse. His one desire in life is to roll stones, and he is absolutely guaranteed its endless fulfilment ... his is now filled with mission and meaning, and he seems to himself to have been given an entry to heaven.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Taylor, *Good and Evil: a New Direction* (New York & London, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 259.

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I find this totally unconvincing and rather lame. It suggests that the presence of a strong desire can suffice to render a meaningless life meaningful. I may have a persistent, obsessive desire to shoot up heroin, but that will not make my life meaningful. Everyone can think of such counterexamples. Taylor is a naturalist in ethics: he bases value and duty on natural, contingently occurring states of the world and of the individual agent. Sisyphus's desire is conceived as a sort of biochemical infection. Many of us think that there is more to desire than this: a *telos*, something for the sake of which the object is sought. And this *telos* may be embraced rationally or irrationally. The meaningfulness of a life is not a disease. Let us turn to the literary illustrations.

Two examples of strikingly meaningless lives: Rosamond and Mr Casaubon in *Middlemarch*, by George Eliot.<sup>4</sup> Mr Casaubon is particularly interesting, especially to academics, because in his futility he imagines himself to be engaged in important research. His ARC grant<sup>5</sup> (so to speak) is for a compendious work, the key to all mythologies, which we imagine to illuminate all that is dark and hidden. The devoted effort to fulfil this prodigious design preoccupies him both before and after his wedding. He has the gumption to propose to Dorothea and secure her as wife, little knowing that he is totally unfit for matrimony and that it will only make him unhappier. Casaubon spends his honeymoon looking up obscure references in libraries in Rome, while Dorothea twiddles her fingers. As for fair Rosamond, she is just a flitting do-nothing. Her prettiness and her social station ensure her complacency in life. She does possess a rather sharp tongue, to her mother's discomfiture. Little does she know that her childish spendthriftness will undermine her marriage to Lydgate, turning it into a hell for them both. I think the meaningfulness of these two lives is manifest. Now for some meaningful lives.

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<sup>4</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London, 1973).

<sup>5</sup> In Australia, money sorely needed to support university education for the general populace is diverted into 'research' projects and boondoggles by the Australian Research Council. The idea seems to be to forward 'research' by dumbing down Australian youth to the demotic level of Ozzie beach culture.

I would instance George Eliot's *Adam Bede*,<sup>6</sup> Dickens' *Little Dorrit*<sup>7</sup> and Adalbert Stifter's Major Stefan Murai in the masterful novella *Brigitta*.<sup>8</sup> I'll concentrate on *Little Dorrit*, a favourite of mine. The essential point about Amy Dorritt is that, in order simply to get on with a somewhat abnormal childhood, she must repeatedly help others who are unappreciative and, in some cases, downright sabotaging. She must achieve this without becoming sick or perverted by her tasks, but also without flouting the straitjacket of manners imposed by Victorian society. Thus she deals with one crisis after another, tactful and effective beyond her years, often receiving little thanks. Her trials mature her, although she remains small of stature. As time goes by, she is rewarded when her sister becomes more realistic about her vocation (dancing), her self-deluded father's becomes more lucid and realistic and, last but not least, when she becomes aware that her acquaintance with the sturdy engineer Mr Clennam has not merely cushioned and improved him, but that they have fallen in love. In the end, Amy reaps every kind of personal satisfaction, growing up to be a fine, altruistic young woman with a life of service, fulfilment and conjugal love before her. Clearly, this is a meaningful life.

I take it as an empirical fact, known to us, that some lives or stretches of life are meaningful and some not. At a more refined level, we also often apprehend when a life hits a turning point, becoming more meaningful than it was before. This is the case when Silas Marner discovers Eppie and adopts her in the book of this name: it's his salvation.<sup>9</sup> We all know of cases like this; most of us, for example, know of a man 'saved by a good woman' (although the cliché now seems a little sickening and politically incorrect). By his own testimony, Saul of Tarsus's life was totally changed on the road to Damascus, when he was struck temporarily blind and a voice from heaven seemed to call out, 'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?'. As

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<sup>6</sup> George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (Harmondsworth, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (London, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Adalbert Stifter, *Brigitta* (Stuttgart, 1948).

<sup>9</sup> George Eliot, *Silas Marner, the Weaver of Raveloe* (Edinburgh & London, 1861).

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a result, a life became more meaningful. Saul changed his name to 'Paul' and the founding of Christianity was assured.

Given that lives or stretches of lives often are meaningful, we now need to ask how to account for this remarkable fact, which seems so central to the worthwhileness of the human journey. There must be an overarching *telos*, for the sake of which the meaningful life is lived. In view of the fundamental, overarching character of this *ur-telos*, it can only ultimately be the same for all. It is God, I say, or at any rate an aspect of God. That is not something we know precisely. As in natural science, it is a probable explanatory hypothesis for which we have evidence, but not conclusive evidence. With time, we may expect to acquire more evidence (or perhaps a refutation).<sup>10</sup> The hypothesis is falsifiable, in good Popperian form.

## **Creation**

God is a reasonable posit as the ultimate purpose of human striving, rational and irrational, emotional and otherwise. Aristotle, who introduced the concept of 'cause' into Western philosophy, recognised four kinds of cause.<sup>11</sup> The one dealt with in the preceding section is called 'final cause'; in addition there are efficient cause, material cause and formal cause. The last two are usually left aside these days. The material cause of a thing is the material it is made of. Aristotle's idea is that the thing could not have existed without its matter, so that the matter must be conceived as helping to cause it. So too with the formal cause: whatever exists has a form, without which it wouldn't be that thing. Thus the form is a cause of the thing.

When we talk of causation or causality these days, we mean efficient cause. This is the circumstance that makes or helps to make a thing or event come about. Further distinctions can be made: if several things act together to bring the effect about, then each of them is a necessary

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<sup>10</sup> This point was made in John Bacon and Juliet Richters, 'What Shall We Live For? A Dialogue' in Venetia Nelson (ed) *On Being Human: Meditations on Experience* (Melbourne, 1990) 9–17, 10f.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *Physica* in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed Richard McKeon (New York, 1941) ch 6, 198a–198b *et seq.*

or contributory cause. If together they are enough, they constitute a jointly sufficient cause. In the modern era, we also recognise causes that are less than 100%: the cause confers n% probability on the effect or brings it about with n% probability or probabilises the effect to an extent of n%.

The fundamental principle of causation nevertheless goes back to the Middle Ages: the so-called Law of Causality that every event has a cause. More precisely, every event has a sufficient cause, which can itself be plural. (Probabilification has not really by general consensus been brought within the purview of the Law of Causality.) Given the Law of Causality, today's events presuppose causal chains stretching far back into the past. As Aristotle noted, they either stretch back infinitely or terminate in a first cause. Actually, it would seem that there must be at least as many first causes as there are backward-reaching chains. Aristotle held, and Scholasticism followed him in this, that all first causes must be identical: there is just one first cause. That is God, asserted the Scholastics. Empirical cosmologists tend also to assume it. Even if (as is now doubtful) it all began with the Big Bang, so far as I know nobody has proposed there to have been two or seven or a million Big Bangs. One is enough, it seems, to get things off the ground.

My reasoning here is quite close to Aristotle's. There is a unique final cause, which Aristotle called the Good. There is a unique first efficient cause, which Thomas thinks is God. My view is that the resulting pair ·Creator/Good just is God or a core aspect of God – a God postulated, though not proven, on the basis of scientific method.

### **Communication and Faith**

We're left with a philosophical construct that consigns us to loneliness, so far as the hoped-for companionship of God is concerned. We don't know whether our God thinks, feels, hears our prayers or communicates with us or other beings. And it is not clear what more in the way of knowledge, observation or inference could suggest an answer to these questions. I submit that the content of prayer and voices from heaven, if there are any (such as 'This is my

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beloved son, in whom I am well pleased' or 'Remember not, remember not, O Lord my sin' or 'Turn again, Dick Whittington, thrice Lord Mayor of London') are more or less vivid fantasies whose symbolic content (what we take them to signify) potently motivates or consoles us. In this, they are a bit like daydreaming. Or they are like masturbation fantasies, in which a more or less vivid picture of the coveted activity or object strongly motivates pretend lovemaking, foreplay or other conation. Praying 'Lord, let me reach the summit' is like the Little Engine that Could puffing away 'I think I can, I think I can ..'. The consolation afforded by prayer is not a two-way dialogue, as it seems. There is no one on the other end of the line, not even an answering-machine message. Praying is something that we do sincerely to ourselves. Imagining a conversation partner comes naturally (as in solitary phone sex) but is not essential. The power of prayer is to psych ourselves up.

From prayer we move on to the attitude of commitment, considered absolutely central to Christianity and most religions. The word 'faith' is often a synonym of 'religion', as when we say 'Elizabeth Taylor embraced the Jewish faith' or 'Buddhism is not a theistic faith' or 'Thus I had to suspend knowledge in order to make room for faith'. However, when Luther and other Reformers insisted that faith alone is the way to salvation, they meant loyalty or devotion to God, rather than any kind of credal belief. We may take a leaf from Buber's book, *Zwei Glaubensweisen*.<sup>12</sup> Buber is forced to this title by the fact that the German *Glaube* is ambiguous between 'belief' and 'loyalty or trust'. In English we have the opposite linguistic embarrassment, as there are too many words in this area: 'belief', 'loyalty', 'trust', 'faith' and so on.

The Protestant is supposed to get faith as a gift from God. If that doesn't work, we may be able to psych ourselves into faith. But the concepts expressed by these labels are not crucial. God doesn't talk to us and we talk to God only to psych ourselves into the right God-centered attitude. So far as we are acquainted with him, God is an

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Buber, *Zwei Glaubensweisen* (Zürich, 1950).

intentional object (in Brentano's sense).<sup>13</sup> The Ætistic God cannot be propitiated, persuaded or bought off. Even if this God were a person (which is not established), it's not clear that we could have a meaningful relationship with such a person. For the Christian, it's faith or works. For the Ætist, it's theological science and works. It's not clear that there's anything to be faithful to or that it would make any difference whether we were faithful or not.

## **The Resurrection**

The events alleged in the Holy Scriptures that are physically or otherwise impossible simply did not happen, and it's silly to believe that they occurred miraculously. (I don't say that the many healings reported of Jesus didn't happen. We still have an incomplete understanding of psychosomatic effects and don't appreciate sufficiently the difference a foreign cultural base can make.) Conceiving of such impossible events and imagining their reality is symbolic thinking, by which we practice taking a sort of science-fiction point of view.

The announcement made during the Seder that Elijah has come to the back door, for example, prompting the youngest son to investigate, doesn't presuppose an actual visit from the real Elijah. The ritual has a traditional significance, which we choose to relive each year during the Seder. Elijah's visit and our traditional response are not facts that we record but rituals that we choose to undergo. This is ritual, not dogma. It's essentially the same when, during the Christmas pageant traditionally enacted in many churches on Christmas Eve, the three Wise Men are seen following the Star: 'For we have seen His Star in the East, and are come to worship Him'. Probably baby Jesus never lay on straw in a manger with lowing cattle hovering over him. Pre-

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<sup>13</sup> The notions of 'intentional object' and 'intentionality' were introduced by Franz Brentano, a late nineteenth-century ex-priest who was a prominent source of what came to be called 'phenomenology'. Intentionality is an attitude of directedness to an object, which may or may not exist. Brentano, *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt* (Leipzig, 1874). Interestingly, another book of ex-priest Brentano's was *Die Lehre Jesu und ihre bleibende Bedeutung!*

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sumably Joseph didn't look 70 and Mary about 19 as they watched over their new baby; presumably Mary didn't wear a turquoise robe with bright red lipstick. The beloved contents of the Christmas pageant are symbolic, motivating ritual, resolution and practice. We go to the pageant not to remind ourselves of certain historical facts, but to marshal and tune up our attitudes and feelings. Not dogma, but pragma.<sup>14</sup>

### **Pragma v Dogma**

In the first Reformation, a hotly contested dispute arose over the role of faith rather than works, in the Christian life. The Catholic view was that both are needed, with sufficiently many of the latter. The fact is that the practice of a religion would be ineffectual and arbitrary without works and works would be arbitrary and unmotivated without faith. Faith is the dogmatic side of religious adherence; works are the pragmatic side. (So Martin Buber distinguished factual belief from the faith of loyalty.) The solution to the faith/works controversy is to recognise that both are important, but faith without works would be far more disastrous for religious health than works without faith. Ritual, pragma and works with no or only vague religious belief is widespread in modern Judaism, particularly (but not only) of the Reform variety.<sup>15</sup> Christians tend to view this condescendingly as a

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<sup>14</sup> Socrates' characterisation there of appropriate love has indeed a religious echo.

Love for Plato is not an empirical, factual, psychic or physical occurrence, but a wellspring of value, symbolized by the white steed in the *Phaidros*. See Mairéad F Costigan, *Ironic Irony in the Phaidros* (Honours thesis, School of Philosophy, University of Sydney, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> One must take care in assessing modern liberal developments in Judaism, such as Samson Raphael Hirsch's Modern Orthodoxy, Mordecai Kaplan's Reconstructionism and Sherwin Wine's [Secular] Humanist Judaism. Reconstructionism includes a fully articulated philosophy of life and society and is far from creedless; Wine's Humanist Judaism likewise. (Wine studied philosophy at the University of Michigan, where he was particularly impressed by logical positivism.) The credal content of Modern Orthodoxy remains to a great extent that of traditional Orthodoxy modernised, as set out by Hirsch in his doctrine of *Torah im derech erez* (the written law with worldly civility). Mordecai Menachem Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (Philadelphia, 1957); Sherwin T Wine, *Judaism beyond God: a Radical New Way to be Jewish* (Society for Humanistic Judaism, 1995).

mistake, an indication that Judaism isn't really a religion at all. But on the whole, it's Christians who make the mistake, imagining that if they think carefully, naturalistically avoiding the virgin birth, the loaves and the fishes, the wedding feast at Cana, the temptation by the devil, the stone rolled away and so on, they will safeguard their religion and its place in the world. But religions don't work like that. They involve thought *and* action (*and* feeling). The thought can be to some extent curtailed, the action not so easily.

We needn't rest with the argument from meaningfulness alone to substantiate God's existence. Let's look at St Thomas's 'Five Ways' of arguing to that conclusion.<sup>16</sup> The Five Ways are: 1. The argument to the first cause; 2. The argument from the sustenance of the world; 3. The argument from the world's arising out of nothing; 4. The argument from design; 5. The argument to the final cause. I submit that the cogency of (1) and (2) is pretty straightforward (*pace* a swarm of thinkers who have pooh-poohed them). (3) doesn't work; it's a pity that Thomas, who took so much from Aristotle, ignored the Stagirite views on the *ur-void*. (Ironically, the lame (3) is generally agreed to be Thomas's best 'proof'.)

We get a close parallel to (4) if we construe 'design' as beauty. Just as explanatory ethical theory presupposes objective, absolute value, so also aesthetic explanation presupposes objective, absolute beauty.<sup>17</sup> The two normative theories are parallel in this regard. I would suggest that Einstein espoused some such view when he said, '*Raffiniert ist der Herr; boshaft ist er nicht!*' and the famous '*Gott würfelt nicht*' (unless he was joking; you never can tell with Einstein). He also said, 'We have to admire in humility the beautiful harmony of the structure of this world, as far as we can grasp it. That

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas's writings more than repay the effort: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, qu 2, 3 in *An Aquinas Reader*, ed Mary T Clark (Garden City, 1972) 122f. See Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London, 2006) 77ff.

<sup>17</sup> This does not mean that all beauty, as apprehended, is objective. I would balk at the suggestion of the objective beauty of Paris Hilton, Disneyland or the Denver Art Museum. Examples of objective beauty may perhaps be found in Sarah Silverman, Mozart's Piano Concerto #21 or the Main Quadrangle Building of Sydney University.

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is all'.<sup>18</sup> When I say 'presupposes', I mean that, as an explanatory framework, ethical theory results from the inference to the best explanation from experience. Similarly, as an explanatory congeries of hypotheses, aesthetics arises by argument to the best explanation from our experience of beauty. It moves us with unanticipated force, like the non-lover's beloved in the *Phaidros*.<sup>19</sup> (*Ars longa, vita brevis*.) The 'dull, sublunary lovers' love' that is in the eye of the voyeur is not necessarily less striking or less intense, but simply local and evanescent. (*Ernst ist das Leben, frivol ist die Kunst*.) Objective beauty is eternal.<sup>20</sup> Explanations have to stop somewhere, but they needn't stop at the level of moral and aesthetic theory. To the extent that they explain and are well-confirmed, these theories cry out for further explanation. This explanation we may call God.

There remains the Fifth Way of St Thomas: the argument to the final cause. This argument prevails when we become conscious that we must do something, that enhancing some component of the world is called for, that sometimes we are genuinely consoled (perhaps by ourselves; perhaps by love; perhaps by prayer), or that an aspect of our life is meaningful to some degree and capable of becoming more so (knock on wood!). When we experience any of these things in our lives, argument to the best explanation leads straight to God.

## **Historical Anticipations of Ætistic Gnosticism**

The God of Ætism differs from the Christian God in that he is not a saviour who dies on the cross to save us all from our sins on the condition that we believe in him and he doesn't talk to us, although

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<sup>18</sup> Letter of Albert Einstein, 1945, quoted in Banesh Hoffmann, *Albert Einstein, Creator and Rebel* (New York, 1972) 195.

<sup>19</sup> See n 3 *supra*.

<sup>20</sup> John Bacon, 'Real Beauty', Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics Colloquium (4 October 1991); Eddy M Zemach, 'Real Beauty', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 16, 1991, 249–265 and *Real Beauty* (College Park, 1997). I didn't collude with my friend; we thought of the title independently. (Abduction from this coincidence leads to the beautiful itself or at any rate the serendipitous itself. *Dies zeigt sich, es ist das Mystische*.)

he sustains the world. It's not clear that he intervenes in the world from day to day to tidy up his creation. Nor does he, like the deist god, lay down the entire future by setting a cosmic mousetrap at the outset, as it were, and then running away. Modern science is indeterministic, leaving scope for God's will to assert itself.

The God of Ætism may appear to be fundamentally different from the God of Judaism. It's fatal to take a simplistic view of Old Testament interpretation, however. Reputable scholars are agreed that several voices speak to us in the *Tanach* and how they are related to each other is not satisfactorily understood. Without going into details, we have as sources the Yahwist J, the Elohist E, the extended Elohist E+ and the Priestly code P. When the OT God says famously 'I am that I am', there are many interpretations and it is not known which is right. When God gives his name, he may be concealing his real (unannounced) name or giving a definite description (whose uniqueness conditions may themselves be unknown). These difficulties and uncertainties with God's name are repeated through much of the OT text. Interpreting it correctly could be the lifetime work of a committee of scholars (like the committee that produced the King James text.)

The closest historically significant precursor of Ætism is Unitarianism. The main difference between Unitarianism and Ætism concerns the personhood of the Unitarian God (though some Unitarians reject this tenet in favour of a deistic God). Similar to Unitarianism credally, though not ritually, is Orthodox Judaism. Next in affinity to Ætism is gnosticism, accounted a heresy in the early Church partly because it was rampant and therefore perceived as a rival. The two best-known versions of gnostic religion are the version that was combated by the early Church (the creed of conscientious Christian apostates and feminists) and Zoroastrianism in Persia. We may distinguish two basic types of gnosticism, which I call 'hard' and 'soft' gnosticism. Hard gnosticism is ditheistic, its adherents believing in two gods: the first, *deus absconditus*, the creator of the world, a component of which was the second, the god active today. It's a bit like a modern corporation with a strong, creative founder

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who gets it off the ground and then resigns, appointing a successor to do the actual CEO work for years to come.<sup>21</sup>

We can view the hard gnostic position as a failed, or at any rate wildly implausible, attempt at explanatory hypothesising. A little investigation and a little imagination suffice to persuade us that one god is enough, if not more than enough. The *deus absconditus* is out of work from our hypothetico-deductive point of view. His abduction fails. ('Abduction' is Peirce's term for inference to the best explanation.) Ætism has a greater affinity with soft gnosticism. This type of religion is monotheistic and highly plausible to many serious Western religious thinkers, among whom the Zoroastrians provide a historically prominent example. However, this religion includes one component that will have no place in Ætism: dualism. It teaches that the world is under the sway of a good principle, God or Ormazd or Ahura-Mazda, and an evil principle, Ahriman or Angra-Mainyu or Satan.<sup>22</sup> The vicissitudes of the actual world reflect the eternal fight between God and Satan.

The dualism of soft gnosticism, unlike ditheism, is plausible. As a hypothesis, it seems to answer to what we actually see going on around us: bad fights good till good turns around and kneecaps evil. Although we have a predilection for good (in spite of our sinfulness) the battle is never resolved. If it were, the world would grind to a halt. (Perhaps it would expire at the heat-death of Sol.) But, although dualism appeals to many, it is not the best explanation of our experience. A principle of good is sufficient. The evil that claims our

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<sup>21</sup> As an example, at Wolfson (Iffley) College, Oxford, where I was a Member of Common Room in 1986, the prominent founding President was the philosopher and cultural historian Sir Isaiah Berlin. Once the building was nearing completion, Sir Isaiah withdrew into the background, to be succeeded by Professor John Morrison. Wolfson thus had a bi-presidential administrative structure: the *praesidens absconditus*, Sir Isaiah, having been decisive in the founding of the College, threw his influence behind Morrison, who was duly appointed the first President.

<sup>22</sup> In some versions, Ormazd creates Ahriman as an intentional object just by thinking of him, a conception which aggravates the problem of evil for Zoroastrian theologians. Note also Elaine Pagels' reinterpretation (or restoration) of 'Satan', who has had a bad press: Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York, 1995).

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attention may exist in the corners that God didn't get around to cleaning up.

Here the problem of evil rears its ugly head. As we shall see, the solution to this difficult theological problem is simply to acknowledge that God is neither omniscient nor omnipotent. Like a benevolent but understanding parent, he lets us muck about on our own a great deal. From that we learn more than if God fixed everything up for us. If mum always picks up our socks for us, we'll never learn to keep our room tidy for ourselves. If God never lets a murderer go free, we'll never learn how to rehabilitate murderers, nor how to discourage their recidivism.

### **A Gnosticism Almost Worthy of Ætism**

One very inspiring modern version of soft gnosticism is found in Mozart's *Magic Flute*. This brilliant psychodrama, with its transcendently inspiring arias and moving instrumental passages, was deliberately written by Mozart and his lodge-brother Schikaneder in order to convey the essence of the guild of freemasonry, to which they both belonged. Their realised intention (a striking case of objective beauty) reaches right down into obscure details of the opera. Listen to the overture for a couple of seconds and then turn it off. What did you hear? Three successive notes or chords, first the tonic, then the prolonged dominant seventh, then the tonic again, one octave higher. This represents the number three, invested with extensive arcane significance by the freemasons. As you turn the opera back on, you'll notice several groups of three as the opera progresses, even groups of three threes: the three ladies, the three boys, the three priests, the three acts.<sup>23</sup> The masons didn't invent the mystical significance of three. As father-mother-child, it is absolutely central to our genesis and self-consciousness as human beings. The most significant familial triad of all – Joseph, Mary, Jesus – reminds

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<sup>23</sup> Only two acts of the opera are actually performed. It's my exegetical contention, however, that a third act is implicit, constituting the progress of the marriage of Tamino and Pamina and culminating in their succession to Sarastro, where he becomes chief of the masonic temple. Next, Pamina bears their first child 'and baby makes three'.

## *On a Panegyric Note*

us that the Christian God is held to be triune: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Growing up in a Christian society imprints us with the triad, as does growing up in a nuclear family.

The overture ends with another triad. In the jacket notes to the Karl Böhm recording, Andreas Holschneider explains:

If the affect of the characters and situations is clarified by the choice of keys and instruments, if the old contrapuntal techniques vividly allegorize the striving endeavour, then the threefold intensifying chord strokes, like the number three in general, its square, and its double bespeak the basic freemasonic symbols in Mozart's composition.<sup>24</sup>

*The Magic Flute* is a parable of maturation. The young people at the center of the action mature into their adult roles, even the flighty bird-man Papageno. Sarastro and his assistants act as tutors or guides to the young people. (The name 'Sarastro' is generally thought to derive from 'Zoroaster'.) The youths are subjected to trials, which may seem ridiculous, but both Pamina and Papageno come close to suicide, so desperate are they to be reunited with their partners. Pamina must decide whether to renounce her mother and is nearly raped by Monostatos (whose name, literally 'standing one', probably connotes 'phallus'). The ultimate trial is the Queen of the Night's raid on Sarastro's Temple of the Sun. (She is paired with Monostatos.) The limp raid is easily repulsed, almost as if by magic. By now Pamina can bear the separation from her mother (the Queen of the Night), whom she still loves. The opera closes:

Priester: Triumph! Triumph! Du edles Paar  
Besieget hast du die Gefahr.  
Der Isis Weihe ist nun dein;  
kommt, tretet in den Tempel ein!

Sarastro: Die Strahlen der Sonne vertreiben die Nacht,  
zernichten der Heuchler erschlichene Macht.

Priester: Heil sei euch Geweihten!

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<sup>24</sup> Andreas Holschneider, 'Zauberspek und philosophische Oper' in program notes to *Die Zauberflöte*, Karl Böhm, dir., Berliner Philharmoniker & RIAS Kammerchor (Deutsche Grammophon, #138 982) 8.

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Heil sie euch Geweihten!  
Ihr dranget durch Nacht.  
Dank sei dir, Isis; dank sei dir, Osiris, gebracht!  
Es siegte die Stärke und krönet zum Lohn  
die Schönheit und Weisheit mit ewiger Kron'!

The reference to Isis and Osiris is masonic lore – so too the invocation of ‘the gods’. We have already seen that the gnosticism of *The Magic Flute* is dualistic: the antipode of Sarastro is the Queen of the Night. Is it also polytheistic? I doubt it. The invocation of the gods is a stylised formula. The gods are never represented as doing anything.<sup>25</sup> If any, it’s Isis and Osiris who would be the (dualistic) gods. They’re also female and male, father and mother. As against the problematic Sarastro/Queen, Osiris/Isis are a totally benign couple. There is one very moving passage, to be sure, in which ‘the gods’ play more than a bit part. It comes near the end of the opera, just as Pamina is to attempt suicide (because she hasn’t seen her boyfriend Tamino for a couple of hours):

Dann ist die Erd’ ein Himmelreich,  
und Sterbliche den Göttern gleich.  
[Then the earth shall be a Heavenly realm,  
and mortals like to Gods.]<sup>26</sup>

Earth as a Heaven, men like gods: these are characteristic gnostic fantasies. Yet their meaning is as serious as it is straightforward. What is affirmed here is ‘the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man’. Earth will be a Heaven when the fatherhood of God is acknowledged; we shall be like gods when we have established the brotherhood of man. (And let us forgo petty terminological squabbles here: this means the siblinghood of all mankind, including women.) To the Christian, this sounds vaguely blasphemous: like gods indeed! But this is a poetic way of saying that a new day will dawn when we’re all as brothers. That’s exactly what the American Civil Rights movement preached: ‘All men are slaves till their brothers are free’. It is not blasphemy but a very practical idealism.

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<sup>25</sup> In Zoroastrianism, the picture is complicated by the *Fravashis*, prototypes of men and oxen created by God during the first of three eras of earth.

<sup>26</sup> ‘The Three Boys’, Act II, Scene 25.

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I'm wandering from Ætism, since I love *The Magic Flute* in all its nuances. To come back to the gods and the apparent dualism of the opera. The Sarastro/Queen couple is definitely dualistic. Do we have in Osiris/Isis ditheism? I think not. Hooking on to supposed ancient Egyptian lore was all the go with the freemasons. The lore was secret (some of it still is). We shouldn't be surprised to find some masonic role or other accorded to practically every figure of Egyptian myth.

My maternal grandfather, Frederick Zeitler Bennett, was a 33rd-degree Mason. (Notice the three-three.) He was so loyal to the order that he refused to go to church with my grandmother and his daughter, my mother. He had his own church, he said, the Zenobia Shrine of the Scottish Rite of his Masonic Order. He would never have revealed the Masonic secrets to anyone, but he had a formula to sum up what for him was the central teaching of freemasonry: 'the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man'. Who is this 'God', given that there was no real God in *The Magic Flute* but only stylised 'gods'. I take it that my grandfather's 'God' was no more nor less than the Isis/Osiris/gods of the opera. In Ætism, God is explicated as first cause/meaning-giver/best explanation/final cause. The masons probably never got so far in the details of their exoteric teaching. I've expounded the similarities and differences between Ætism and *The Magic Flute*. To me, they are compelling and endlessly fascinating, to the extent that they genuinely cast light on one another. That the religion of the opera is heretical need not detain us. I'm not trying to illuminate Christianity but to advocate Ætism.

## **Atrocities in the Old Testament**

Although my title alludes to Dawkins,<sup>27</sup> the main drift of my study is against him. Nevertheless, when it comes to the crucifixion, I'm with him all the way<sup>28</sup> – and so too with the atrocities of the OT he discusses, the worst of the OT: the murder of the Levite's concubine and the massacre of the Benjamites in reprisal. Contra Dawkins, it's not the case that God perpetrated all these acts. In fact, some of the

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<sup>27</sup> Dawkins, *op cit*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 252.

atrocities reported were probably committed without the complicity of any god. But be that as it may, we Ætists are under absolutely no constraint to lay it all at the feet of Yahweh, let alone our God. This is a significant objection to Dawkins' account. As he combs the Bible to glean 'biblical morality' from the alleged behaviour of God, he overlooks entirely that to report conduct is not to condone or advocate it. Everybody knows this. When the local paper reports a murder, we don't take it as a moral command to go out and commit another murder. Gleaning the morality of the Bible is a far subtler matter; I doubt that it can be done. The Bible doesn't report and illustrate one moral system, but many. And it doesn't deliver formulas but rather ambiguous illustrations. Only over the long haul does it approximate proselytisation for a morality.

But, in the spirit of Dawkins, there are two OT examples where we're less than thrilled by Yahweh's approach to his Hebrew children's affairs. The OT God speaks to them, explains political developments, intervenes in their projects, vaunts his jealousy, turns the tide of battles and rewards or punishes individuals. The Book of Job, for example, is very moving and has doubtless inspired many religious readers. Yet Satan intervenes actively in Job's life, while God sits back and watches with the detachment of a couch-potato to see how Job will take all the setbacks Satan is able to mete out to him. In the end God gives back to Job the equivalent of what he has lost and we have a 'happy ending'. Job gets a new wife and with her begets as many sons and daughters as he had before the Satanic experiment commenced. However, we know that each human being is unique and irreplaceable, and that goes for Job's first family too. The advent of ten new children by no means compensates the loving parent for the ten lost children, a stolen generation of Job-offspring, as it were. For that matter, the healing of Job from boils is not full recompense, since Job will likely remember the pain of those boils all his life. He may dream of them in nightmares, if Yahweh doesn't step in with some celestial chloral hydrate. Job nevertheless forgave God the terrible sufferings the deity had countenanced. Would you have done the same? Job may be a good story, an edifying and inspiring story even. But we're under no obligation to believe it ever happened. If it did, I think a better explanation of Job's terrible sufferings can be found

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than the cruel and callous agency of Satan, abetted by a voyeuristic Yahweh.

Perhaps the most horrible story in the entire OT is the account of the confrontation of the children of Israel with the Benjamites.<sup>29</sup> It starts with the attempt of a conscientious host to spare his male guest gang buggery and sexual abuse. A quotation will give the flavour of events. (I translate freely, rather than drawing on the King James):

[The Levite's host speaks to the rabble:] 'Behold, here are my virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do with them what you like; but against this man [the Levite guest] don't do so vile a thing' ... and they abused her [the concubine] all night until the morning. As the dawn began to break, they let her go ... Her master [the Levite] too rose up in the morning, and when he opened the door of the house, ... behold: there was his concubine lying on the threshold ... He said to her, 'Get up, let's be going'. But there was no answer ... He took a knife and laying hold of his concubine he divided her, limb from limb, into twelve pieces, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. [Then the people said] 'Such a thing has never happened or been seen from the day that the people of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt until this day'. (Judges 20:24-30)

What do you suppose happened next? The Israelites, compatriots of the Levite, attacked the Benjamites (the tribe of the concubine's abusers). Yahweh was there to cheer them on:

And the men of Israel rounded on the Benjamites, and smote them with the edge of the sword, men and beasts and all that they found. And all the towns which they found they set on fire ... And the people [of Israel] lifted up their voices and wept bitterly. And they said, 'O Lord, God of Israel, why has this come to pass in Israel, that there should be today one tribe lacking in Israel?' ... [The Benjamite] Yevash-Gilead was there. So the congregation sent thither twelve thousand of their bravest men, and commanded them, 'Go and smite the inhabitants of Yevash-Gilead with the edge of the sword; also the women and the little ones. Every man [woman, and child] you shall utterly destroy'. (Judges 20:48-21:10)

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<sup>29</sup> Dawkins cites this case too. I've worried for years about the Benjamites and the Amalekites. (I've never heard the relevant passages read out as the OT lesson in church, I must say!)

(They did not actually do it, but did massacre a considerable number of the Yevash-Gileadites.) The account may be based on an actual historical incident. It is absolutely horrifying to read. Did Israel really do this with the Lord's complicity? Either way, the sins lay at the feet of the men of Israel or their commanders. We Ætists have no reason to believe that God did any of it. The dreadful war with the Benjamites need not be reckoned among God's sins, properly understood. The perpetrators were the ones who did it!

On an intuitive level, Dawkins' (and Hodgson's<sup>30</sup>) critique of the Lord compares in subtlety with that of Lord Randolph Churchill (father of Winston). As a young man, like many sons of the aristocracy with time on their hands, Churchill enlisted for a stint with His Majesty's troops. At one point his division was becalmed and the men had a couple of days to sit around and occupy themselves as best they could. Not being bookish, Randolph had not packed a novel with which to amuse himself during the lull. Taking pity on him, his mates lent him a copy of the only extra book they had on hand, the Bible. Randolph retired to his tent with the book under his arm, to relieve the doldrums even with such boring reading matter. After a few hours, his fellow soldiers were startled by loud cries emanating from the same tent: 'God is a shit! God is a shit!'<sup>31</sup>

I have one last bone to pick with Dawkins. With astonishing recall, he quotes a hymn fifty years after he learned it:

Christian, dost thou see them  
On the holy ground?  
How the troops of Midian  
Prowl and prowl around  
Christian, up and smite them,  
Counting gain but loss.  
Smite them by the merit  
Of the holy cross.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> David Hodgson, 'Dawkins and the Morality of the Bible', *Quadrant* 51.5, 2007, 38–43 (review of Dawkins, *op cit*).

<sup>31</sup> Anecdote with liberties from DM Armstrong, Challis Professor of Philosophy Emeritus, University of Sydney Staff Club, left rear table.

<sup>32</sup> Dawkins, *op cit*, 245.

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Well, I too learned that hymn about fifty years ago; it is my favourite. Dawkins takes it to celebrate the massacre of the Midiänites, an interpretation which never occurred to me, even in my most fervent Christian period. Perhaps this is due to the fact that I learned the correct text:

Christian, dost thou see them  
on the holy ground?  
How the powers of darkness  
rage thy steps around?  
Christian, up and smite them,  
counting gain but loss  
in the strength that cometh  
by the Holy Cross.<sup>33</sup>

Thus an allegory of a military battle resisting Satan becomes in Dawkins' hyperactive brain an advocacy of massacre. No wonder he's down on the God 'delusion'!<sup>34</sup> The moral: know your sources before you issue polemic in writing (particularly controversial polemic) otherwise it may backfire!

### **Who's that Guy up in the Sky?**

To the believer-in-the-street (any street) what may be deeply offputting about Ætism is the lack of a guarantee that its God is a person. Christians and Jews alike (with the possible exception of Secular Humanist Jews and some Unitarians) are accustomed to seek solace in direct conversations with God. The Christians make it official: God is a member of the Trinity and, in another of his Trinitarian guises, he is the man Jesus. The human Christian God, or Son thereof, eats, quarrels with his mother, wrestles with temptation, answers our prayers and hears our adoring hymns, no doubt with a human aural sense of pitch. Compared to gentle Jesus, meek and mild, the God of Ætism is definitely a drink of cold water.

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<sup>33</sup> Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, *The Hymnal* (Philadelphia, 1933) no 275.

<sup>34</sup> I suppose that the old standby 'Onward, Christian Soldiers' (hardly an instance of deathless musical inspiration, admittedly) upsets him equally.

This is the most burning question thrown up by Ætism, which is otherwise a carefully worked-out, benign, logical and rationalistic system of religion and theology: is God a person, a conscious being who acts in the world and hears our prayers? My answer: we don't know, but it's not likely. Such a hypothesis is not incompatible with Ætism, but neither is it entailed by it. There may be something about the world, or our experience of it, that is explained or partially explained by the hypothesis that God is a person. I wouldn't rule it out, but frankly I should put little stock in such a hypothesis.<sup>35</sup> For example, it may be that a change of heart such as that experienced by Jean Valjean<sup>36</sup> or Silas Marner<sup>37</sup> or Richard Henchard<sup>38</sup> presupposes something causally innovative beating in their breast, which no human being (themselves included), nor buzz of atoms, nor cloud of radiation, could have effected. Perhaps God softened their heart; what do we know? Stranger things have happened, we might concede.

You might think that Christianity minus messianic redemption would simply be mainstream Judaism. That isn't exactly true. The Jews are represented in the Torah as praying to and conversing with God all the time. Ætism doesn't affirm such communication, but accepts it provisionally as an hypothesis. The OT has a concept of sin and we know, of course, that sin does actually occur from time to time (too often, more's the pity). It's not clear what the status of sin would be in Ætism: presumably a failure of moral duty rather than of obedience to God. The question cries out for closer scrutiny. The Jews and the Christians, then, have their sin; Ætism does not, or not in the same sense (though Ætists can of course be just as evil.)

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<sup>35</sup> But note: 'The most intelligent, interesting and ethically valuable things we know about directly are humans, which are personal. It is hard to imagine how such things could have arisen from a completely non-personal divinity, or why it would have wanted ... to produce any such things'. James Franklin, 'Letter to Editor', *Quadrant* 51:6, 2007, re: Hodgson, *op cit*.

<sup>36</sup> Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables* (Brussels, 1862).

<sup>37</sup> Eliot, *op cit*.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Life and Death of the Mayor of Casterbridge: a Story of a Man of Character* (London, 1975).

### **But What Would Jesus Say?**

Not all sincere believers in some version of the Judaeo-Christian faith put Jesus at stage center. All the same, he is a uniquely awe-inspiring, engaging man, whom we are strongly motivated to consult, both on religious matters and on questions of human and emotional conduct. So what would Jesus make of Ætism? My reading of the synoptic Gospels suggests that Ætism doesn't fulfil the whole of Jesus' religious faith and practice: he prayed sometimes and referred to God or the Lord as doing things that made a difference in the world. He ended his life with a direct, moving appeal to God. This was not a man who denied the personhood of God.

On the matter of Messianic salvation the picture is cloudier. The doctrine of salvation from the cross is essentially Pauline. No one can deny that Jesus seems to have considered his death to be meaningful, not just a waste of human or divine resources. But it's hard to accept the resurrection: such things just don't happen, we're strongly inclined to say. How, then, do we explain Jesus' striking earthly apparitions after his death?<sup>39</sup> I suspect that the gospel-writers made them up or drew on fabricated sources such as Q or the Toledot Yeshu that may have come to be accepted in the fledgling Church. We know that the gospels were not written down until about 65 years after Jesus' death. That leaves time for a lot of water under the bridge, a lot of busy creativity, not to mention bowdlerisation.

One of the most striking things about the Jesus tradition is the imputation of divinity. Trinitarians hold that the three Persons are distinct from each other and that they are yet all One. This has been dismissed as flagrantly illogical by arrogant agnostics and atheists. But it can be innocuously reconciled with logic as follows: the three Persons are not identical with each other but are distinct; they merely bear a strong equivalence relation to each other. (An equivalence relation is one that is reflexive, symmetric and transitive.) Such a relation partitions its field into equivalence classes. One of these classes is the Trinity (Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit). But what is the equivalence

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<sup>39</sup> Mark 16:9–20; Luke 24.

relation? We're hard put to say. Thus this logical reconstruction of the Trinity is somewhat empty – even if mathematically quite tenable.

It's noteworthy that Jesus seems often to refer to himself as 'the Son of Man'. Who's that? Perhaps most Christians read it as a kind of informal or secularising euphemism for 'Son of God'. The Son of Man just is the second Person in the Trinity. Quite the contrary: the Son of Man is by definition a man, not God or any aspect thereof. To be sure, he claims on occasion to be the Messiah, as when he addresses the Samaritan woman at the well (who is living with her fifth partner):

The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming ...; when he comes, he will show us all things'. Jesus said to her, 'I who speak to you am he'.  
(John 4:25f)

This could easily have been interpolated by the evangelist to make a convincing story. (Regarding the Samaritans as irretrievably apostate, Jews would have had reservations about acknowledging the Samaritan messiah.) When Jesus says, 'The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head', it's not the second Person of the Trinity who needs a pillow; it's a man. The Son of God would have other resources for getting forty winks. The 'Son of Man' tradition was not Jesus' invention. It goes back at least to Ezekiel and Second Isaiah, a Psalms-like book of the Prophets containing passages that have moved Christian and Hassidic messianists alike through the ages. In Ezekiel, the narrator (presumably Ezekiel) begins nearly every chapter with 'And thou, O son of man ...', representing God as speaking to him.

The following passage furnishes the lyrics of one of the loveliest oratorios ever (have you not heard?):

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.  
The voice of one that crieth,  
'In the wilderness, prepare ye the way of Yahweh:  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God'.  
Every valley shall be exalted, and every hill made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,

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and the rough places plane.  
The glory of Yahweh shall be revealed,  
and all flesh shall see it together:  
for the mouth of Yahweh hath spoken it.  
Behold, a maiden shall conceive, and bear a son,  
and his name shall be called 'Immanuel'.  
O Zion, that bringest good tidings,  
get thee up into the high mountains.  
O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings,  
lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid.  
Say unto the cities of Judah, 'Behold your God'.  
He shall feed his flock like a shepherd:  
he shall gather the lambs with his arm,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
and shall gently lead those that are with young.  
(Isaiah 7:14; 40:1–11)

The words 'Son of Man' don't appear here, but that's what Isaiah is talking about. Immanuel, 'God with us', is not God but the son of a maiden, a (possibly unwed)<sup>40</sup> mother who named him 'God with us'. Jerusalem is adjured to say, 'Behold your God', but it doesn't mean that Jerusalem points to itself and claims to be God, nor that Mary points to her baby and says, 'This is God'. It means that Jerusalem and Judah are to acknowledge Yahweh as their God because the babe, the son of a maiden, has appeared amongst them. The son of man, like his cousin, is a harbinger, not a pretender. If we had any lingering doubts about the identity of the Lord and the Son, Second Isaiah helpfully explains:

To whom then will you liken God,  
or what likeness compare with him? ...  
Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
Has it not been told you from the beginning?  
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?  
It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,  
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers.  
Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,  
and spreads them like a tent to dwell in ...  
'To whom then will you compare me,  
that I should be like him?'  
says the Holy One.

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<sup>40</sup> For more lurid gossip about the Holy Family, see *ToI<sup>e</sup> dot Yeshu*.

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Lift up your eyes on high and see:  
Who created these? ...  
Have you not known?  
Have you not heard?  
Yahweh is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth. (Isaiah 40:18–28)

God is the Creator: it couldn't be made more plain. *Ætism* accepts this (on good authority, you see). It's likely that even Jesus, with his impressive training in the oral and written law, would have figured this out.

### **The Problem of Evil**

One of the knottiest problems of theology is the problem of evil. The atheist Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov* rejects God because at least one child has suffered at some point.<sup>41</sup> For many thoughtful people, God and evil simply cannot coexist in the same world. What does the *Ætist* think? A New York University colleague Steven J Brams suggested the answer to me thirty years ago: God is not omnipotent.<sup>42</sup> Some evil exists for which God is not responsible. At a stroke this obviates the need for predestination, in which as a Presbyterian I was so thoroughly drilled. Denying the omnipotence of God makes free will tenable. This is welcome, in my view, because the evidence for the freedom of the human will is overwhelming.

When a particle is fired through a small slit, it may be deflected either left or right according to the quantum theory. Either way, we need not lay responsibility for the behaviour of the particle at the feet of God. God may be a spectator of the experiment, just as we are. (Of course, observers may affect the experiment, as Heisenberg pointed out.) But God has other fish to fry. In this he is no different from us, even if he has no government research grant to conduct research at HILAC.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevski, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans Constance Garnett and Ralph E Matlaw (Harmondsworth, 1958).

<sup>42</sup> Steven Brams, *Biblical Games: Game Theory and the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, 2003) 4.

<sup>43</sup> The Heavy Ion Linear Accelerator at Berkeley (which I was privileged to inspect in the summer of 1957, when I still wanted to be a nuclear physicist).

## So How Good is God?

According to the Puritan tradition, God is very good but is characterised in terms that make him sound quite evil. Here is what the greatest Puritan preacher has had to say:

The God that holds you over the pit of hell much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath toward you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful and venomous serpent is in ours.<sup>44</sup>

I don't suppose many of us would want such a God for our father, let alone as the *telos* of our virtuous actions. Jonathan Edwards may have recommended this God to his parishioners sincerely, but how many of them make it back to church the following Sunday? Edwards' sermon is planted squarely in a prominent Judæo-Christian tradition, that of 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord'. The God of Ætism doesn't say that. Perhaps he says nothing at all.

Traditionally, God is reckoned to be perfect. What of the God of Ætism? I have claimed that the positing of God is the conclusion of an argument to the best explanation. In general, being the best explanation does not make the *explanans* a good thing. When Ignác Semmelweis discovered that germs on dirty hands caused puerperal fever, it didn't make those germs good.<sup>45</sup> All the same, when we approve of an action as undertaken for the sake of the *ur-telos*, it would be odd to hold simultaneously that the *ur-telos* was not good. If it were not good, then acting for its sake would lose its point. We seem to be close here to the classical view that some things are good for their own sake. The *ur-telos*, God, is good for its/his own sake. Otherwise, it's not clear how he could fill the role of the final cause of earthly striving for improvement.

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<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Edwards, 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God' in John E Smith *et al* (eds) *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (New Haven, 1995) 520.

<sup>45</sup> For Semmelweis's investigation of childbed fever, see Carl G Hempel, *Philosophy of Natural Science* (Englewood Cliffs, 1966) 3f.

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## **Comfort Ye, My People**

The heretical religion of Ætism may seem like cold comfort to the traditional believer. All I can say is that agnosticism and atheism, the most popular theological positions among secular humanists<sup>46</sup> and intellectuals of our day, is even colder comfort. I pray that it will catch on – not that my praying will make any difference. I'm too pessimistic about mankind's defining characteristic of rationality to expect a new dawn of Ætism tomorrow. I close with an invocation that may have been spoken by the Israelites at Mizpah, just before they butchered the Benjamites: 'May Yahweh watch between me and thee, while we are absent one from the other'. That formula, known as the 'Mizpah benediction', is frequently recited at the close of Protestant worship services. But Yahweh will oblige off his own bat, not in answer to prayer.

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<sup>46</sup> Adherents of Secular Humanist Judaism excepted.

