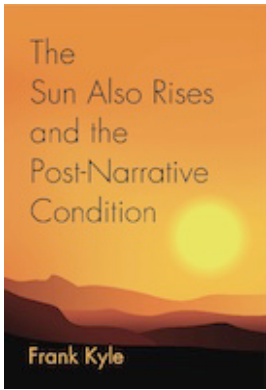


The  
Sun Also Rises  
and the  
Post-Narrative  
Condition

Frank Kyle



*The Sun also Rises presents the ontology, ethics, and aesthetics of Hemingway's worldview by examining the post-Narrative condition that emerged after World War I. It describes the postwar generation's response to the war's negation of the traditional meanings and values embedded in religious and secular grand narratives.*

*The Sun Also Rises and the Post-Narrative Condition suggests a new orientation to the world that might be called religious. The Great War proved the old anthropomorphic religions incapable of sustaining peace. To the contrary, history has shown that time and again they encourage conflict. Then the question that arises is whether there can be a religion without a god. A religion requires that which is adored, revered, and cherished. The Sun Also Rises suggests that that the mundane world itself is such an object and that nature is the mysterium tremendum, the mysterious primordial origin of all things. A new religion must encourage peace rather than conflict and reveal the mundane world as humanity's true primordial progenitor and as such the only object deserving of religious adoration. And, as Jake illustrates in *The Sun Also Rises*, in this new religion each person achieves absolute value and self-realization through acts of appreciative understanding.*

# **The Sun Also Rises And the Post-Narrative Condition**

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***The Sun Also Rises***

And the Post-Narrative Condition

**Frank Kyle**

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## **Appendix D:** Rediscovering the Earth: Jake Barnes and Bashō

### **Escaping the Dark Cave of JudeoChristian Myth**

Because of World War I Jake Barnes experience the death of God. The logical-moral implication that occurred in him and millions of other victims of that war was that such a historical event was incompatible with the universe-creating, beneficent deity. That might seem a great loss, but it could also be seen as a liberating event. And why would the death of God be such a great loss if “he” “stood” by and allowed millions of human beings to slaughter themselves? In this world, God made no difference in the lives of the people who died because of the war or to the people who lives were ruined by the war even though they survived. What about Heaven? Heaven is nothing more than fanciful speculation. Besides there is a contradiction in the idea of a God who allows the most horrendous suffering to occur that “he” could easily prevent (he causes wars and plagues so can just as easily prevent them) and then rewards some (a minority) people with eternal bliss in the afterlife.

World War I cut the umbilical cord of faith that not only kept Jake a child but also prevented him from knowing the earth. We might take the word “knowing” in the Biblical sense. Once the jealous, overbearing, intrusive divine “father” was dead, Jake was able to leave his “father’s” house and fall in love with the earth. JudeoChristianity has always been a depreciator of the earth. It may be God’s creation but it exists in a fallen and corrupt state. What is required of every believer is to turn away from the earth an look to God. In *The Sun Also Rises* when Jake enters a church to pray he turns his back on the earth. Churches are enclosed spaces designed to separate the faithful from the earth. They have windows but their purpose is not to allow the believer to see outside but only allow light into the church, usually through stained glass designs depicting religious scenes and symbols. A church is a physical embodiment of myth. Its purpose is to incarcerate the believer within a mythic structure.

And the purpose of the minister or priest is to ensure that the believer takes the church with him or her, a portable myth that like the stained glass windows colorizes the believer’s experience and understanding of the earth. JudeoChristianity devaluates the earth in various ways, thus devalues a believer’s experience of the earth. Some ways are more negative than others. How Pilgrims viewed black cats illustrates a more negative view of the earth as a sin-ridden environment populated by demonic enticers. Especially perverted is JudeoChristianity’s puritanical view of the human body, especially the female body, which has been seen as having a demonic influence similar to that of black cats. Thus the necessity of keeping the female body hidden—most often by the use of concealing clothing. In this sense, the view of the female body illustrates how the Abrahamic religions have viewed the earth and its inhabitants.

The Abrahamic depreciation of the earth originates with Judaism. This is clearly illustrated in the ancient Jews hatred of peoples who worship the various forces of nature. And it should be noted that Greek and Roman pagan temples were edifices that opened upon the natural world rather than shut it out. However, it is Saint Paul who deserves the most credit for depreciating life on earth. His negativity was passed on to Saint Augustine, who claims that nature's creations possess beauty but that beauty is not inherent but derived from God. Ergo, nature's creations are really God's creations.<sup>317</sup> In his *Confessions* Augustine says,

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<sup>317</sup> Augustine's claims are always useful illustrations of how the religious mind reasons. First come the religious claims based on revelation (leaps of imagination), such as "God created the Universe," as described in the Book of Genesis. Scripture serves as the storage facility for revelations dogmatically declared to be true. The Bible is like a museum filled with ancient artifacts that are kept behind bullet proof (criticism proof) glass: observe but do not touch, not even to repair damage that naturally occurs over time.

After storage, begins an endless process of contriving evidence (imaginative interpretations of empirical facts) to support the claims.\* In part this is due to the fact that the passage of time does, in fact, inflict considerable damage upon dogmatic "truths."\*\*\* This stage is a process of rationalization, the purpose of which is reparation, restoration and legitimization. And the process is clearly endless given that has continued for over two millennia. What makes the process so difficult is that the claims themselves cannot be modified—only justified.\*\*\* However, the entire "reasoning" process still requires an ongoing form of willful blindness to what actually occurs in nature and to the absolute absence of perceivable (rather than imagined or inferred) divine presence or activity in nature.

\*A totally unnecessary process for religious (faith-based) claims since the religious mind assumes faith trumps reason. Yet, accepting religious claims only on faith apparently exasperates certain religious minds, such as Saint Augustine and Ferguson? They seem to want for religious claims the same status and validity scientific claims have. But that's wanting no-thing (spirit/God) to be some thing (like a peach). But the law of non-contradiction keeps getting in the way. They should take the advice of uncritical true believers—such as Kierkegaard—and be satisfied with making the leap of faith, which for most believers, uncritical believers, is a very small leap, more like a hop.

\*\* Almost all, if not all, of Aristotle's physics and laws of motion suffered such damage and required extensive repair or replacement. But his claims were scientific, thus not sacrosanct.

\*\*\*Care must be taken not to "throw out the baby with the dirty bath water." To JudeoChristians this is exactly what Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* does. The book offers a scholarly, critical-historical examination of Jesus' life. It also celebrates Jesus as a great wise man, perhaps history's greatest wise man. However, the critical-historical approach makes it impossible to accept Jesus as a God-man: godly, yes; divinely inspired, yes; but himself divine, no.

His chapter on miracles offers an illustration of what I mean. Renan says that the ability to perform miracles was recognized as a "privilege frequently conferred by God upon men." (249) The Synoptic Gospels are replete with Jesus' miracles. The miracles were essential to establishing divinity of Jesus. Renan says Jesus was reluctant to perform miracles but others, including his disciples, expected miracles of him. So far so good, but then he says, "We will admit, then, without hesitation, that acts which would now [19<sup>th</sup> century!] be considered acts of illusion or folly, held a large place in the life of Jesus." (256) In one sentence Renan repudiates one of the mainstays of Jesus' divinity.

“O Lord, who are beautiful, made these things, for they are beautiful; you who are good made them, for they are good; you who are made them, for they are. Yet they are not so good, nor are they so beautiful as you, nor do they even be in such wise as you, their creator. Compared to you, they are neither good, nor beautiful, nor real.” (Bk. 11; ch. 4. Trans. by Ryan.)

Contradictorily, in the very next line he claims that “We *know* all this,” even though our “knowledge” is “ignorance” compared to God’s knowledge. The most important notion here is the absolute worthlessness of the earthly realm in comparison with God. If anything here on earth has value, it does only because that value is derived from God. Augustine’s intent is to encourage believers to do what he does, constantly focus on God. All the good things of nature should be treated as mirrors reflecting God’s image or presence. To appreciate an orange for itself is a sin because God should be the object of appreciation because God created the orange. Good earthly things (and I know of no other) become sinful things if they become objects of reverence. That is an ever present theme in the Old Testament. Again, the strangeness of this view of nature is the absence of God. Nowhere in an orange is God to be found.

The French Catholic friar Pierre-Marie Emonet seems to recognize God’s apparently absence as a serious obstacle to religious belief. No one, not the saints Paul and Augustine, suffer more from God sickness than Emonet. As a preacher and writer he devoted his life defending the belief in God. Why God would need any human to do this is one of the great mysteries of the JudeoChristian deity. Why doesn’t “he” simply make an appearance so that people can be certain of “his” existence? The apparent answer is that is not how the JudeoChristian game works. It’s a game that is based on challenging people to believe what is impossible to believe, such as to believe that an orange is given by God in spite of there being no evidence of this. Those who believe in spite of the lack of evidence get to live happily ever after in Heaven. Those who can’t

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And it’s not helpful to the authority of the religion and its people represented by Jesus when Renan says in the same chapter, “The admirable treatise, ‘On Sacred Disease,’ by Hippocrates, which set forth the *true principles* of medicine on this subject, *four centuries and a half before Jesus*, had not banished from the world *so great an error*” (253; italics mine). The reference is to epilepsy and used in the context of Jesus’ performing exorcisms. The assumption of the religious mind was that demons “pervaded all minds” and “seized hold of the bodies of certain persons and made them act contrary to their will.” (252) Hippocrates, on the other hand, declared that the sacred disease “is no more sacred than other diseases” (*Wikipedia*, “On the Sacred Disease”).

What Renan reveals is that the Greek science long ago offered a truer way of understanding human illness than did Jewish superstition. Yet, because Judaism would take control of the Roman Empire empirical science would be crushed under the heel of religious superstition. And it wouldn’t be until Renan time that epilepsy would be treated as a neurological disorder by the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot and the great error would be banished, at least in modern societies.

make the leap of faith will live unhappily ever after in Hell. It's a very strange game for God to be playing.

Emonet attempts to use metaphysical magic—appeals to transcendental substance, essence, and being—to establish the existence of God in the orange or rose or tree, but he fails. But that is not the issue here. The issue is his depreciation of nature. He says in his book of metaphysical magic—*God Seen in the Mirror of the World*—“It is on account of the poverty of things that the intellect can find the reason for their being only by leaving this world” and heading off to the world where God lives. “Things,” he says, “are poor in their act of being. They are poor in their very roots.” (41) Earlier in the book he provides the above quotation from Augustine. Toward its end he says, “in the depths of things, perfections are found whose sole Cause and Bestower is God” and that “the world is suspended from God” and that “God is the Being of every being.” (102) This way of thinking is an act of desperation—not celebration—on the part of a theist. So desperate for God that he must convince others in order to convince himself. At least so it seems to me.

This view hollows out the value of each and every natural entity and phenomenon. It transforms the natural world into a puppet show in which God is the maker of the puppets and the puppeteer. Worst of all is that it transforms nature into a means to an end (the revelation of the divine) rather than seeing nature's creations as ends in-themselves. Far more than science, JudeoChristianity transformed nature's creations into objects of utility, that is, objects of relative worth. It was not science that first disenchanting the world but JudeoChristianity, with the help of Plato's metaphysics of Forms or Ideas, adopted and corrupted by JudeoChristianity by having the Forms serve as God's thoughts, which Plato never, ever intended.<sup>318</sup> Nature is a fruit basket

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<sup>318</sup> Plato's depreciation of the objects of this world was solely epistemological. Typical of many philosophers Plato's believed humanity's *raison d'être* was thinking and knowing. He went so far as to claim that thinking was for humans a means to salvation. I believe thinking (cogitation, meditation, intellectual investigation and analysis, etc.) is a really special ability, but I don't believe that it is any more valuable or meaningful than being a parent, farmer, fisherman, mechanic, or artist. And most of humanity would agree with me. Let's face it, knowing (mapping) the human genome has to be very interesting, but is knowing that blueprint more meaningful than giving birth to and parenting a human baby? Or is doing that scientific work more meaningful than raising, teaching, or playing with a child? No. Is the botanical understanding (the idea) of an orange of greater value or more meaningful than an actual orange? No, and I believe most botanists would agree with me. They love knowing about plants because they love plants even more than they love knowing about them. Their knowledge is inspired by love.

And then there are those abstract qualities such as beauty and goodness. Plato would place the idea of beauty above a beautiful object, which, he believed, expresses beauty only imperfectly. But what is beauty in-itself? The Platonic claim that there is an absolute, standard form of beauty is simply wrong. But let's assume that the essence of beauty can be defined: Beauty possesses x, y, and z characteristics. So how is that definition of beauty



superior to and of greater value than a beautiful object, such as a sunset? The fact is the definition of beauty or the truth of beauty is not in-itself beautiful. Plato would say that the mathematical definition of a sphere is superior to an actual sphere, because, in words of the Jesuit priest and historian of philosophy Frederick Copleston, the abstract standard is immutable, constant, perfect and eternal. In the case of the abstract, perfect sphere, those characteristics may be true, but the abstract (definitional) sphere is not superior to or of greater value than an imperfect sphere such as the moon. Copleston also gives an example of seven apples plus three apples equaling ten apples.\* The apples are denigrated because they are mutable and pass away whereas the numerical equation doesn't. To me this is nonsense, and I believe most scientists (perhaps not mathematicians) would agree. An apple is a marvel deserving of reverential appreciation. It is miraculous in the original sense of the word—that which causes wonder.

\*See Copleston's *A History of Philosophy Vol 2: Medieval Philosophy* (Image Books, 1993), 59.

Thus, Plato, believing thinking is humanity's highest calling, would most likely give greater value to *knowing* about humans and oranges than to the entities themselves. The Hebrew religion had always view the world in the way Plato does. The things of the world had value because they had been invented and created by God. An orange has practical value as an eatable fruit, but its supreme value is serving as a reflection—imperfect, of course—of God's goodness and wisdom. Augustine believed that any praise—great or small—for things of this world should be redirected toward God. And this is the view of JudeoChristianity: that the things of this world have not absolute value and any value they do have is derived from their creator, God. So when JudeoChristian Americans celebrate Thanksgiving, they give thanks *to God not to* the turkey that has lost its life to feed the family, nor to the cows that provided the various dairy products, nor to apples, raisins, yams, potatoes, beans, Brussels spouts, lettuce, spinach, chestnuts, pumpkins, wheat, or any of the other eatables enjoyed at Thanksgiving, and certainly not to nature, because doing so would be forms of idolatry and paganism.

JudeoChristians recognize the practical value of the things of this world, but that value is not considered absolute. From before the time of Saint Augustine to today, illustrated by Emonet's theosophy, JudeoChristians have utilized a modified version of Plato's philosophy to give rational credence to their mythological claim that God created the world in a rational rather than in an unintelligently manner. In other worlds, Jewish and JudeoChristian theologians or mythologians have used Greek philosophy to give the JudeoChristian myth the appearance of being a rational explanation of the origin and structure of the universe and its occupants. Whereas for Plato the value of the things of this world was their ability to trigger awareness of their perfect prototypes, JudeoChristians valued them as a rickety ladder that leads to God, their supposed creator and humanity's source of salvation and damnation. In both cases, the things of this world have only subordinate value, and both Plato and JudeoChristians would prefer skipping them altogether going directly to the truth or to God.

Oddly, however, in both cases doing so would eliminate the philosophical and theological games played by Plato (and his followers) and JudeoChristians that actually give to them life's ultimate purpose or *raison d'être*. It would be like getting a card in the game of Monopoly that says *Advance to Go and Win the Game*. In the JudeoChristianity game it

would say *Advance to God and Skip Life on Earth*. The game played by philosophers is the search for truth. For JudeoChristians it's obedience to God and hopefully qualifying for eternal life in Heaven. Yet, both Platonic philosophers (in particular, Neo-Platonists) and JudeoChristians would skip the game—the living of life—if they could go directly to what they perceive as life's destination, which is otherworldly. In ancient times skipping the game of life is exactly what JudeoChristian martyrs sought to do. Other JudeoChristians withdrew from the lifeworld by escaping to convents, monasteries, or deserts. Abandonment of the material realm of earthly existence was the objective of both Neo-Platonist philosophers (isolated in their ivory towers) and JudeoChristians, which logically depreciated earthly existence.

JudeoChristianity distorts Plato's philosophy by transforming the prototype forms or essences that are reflected imperfectly in each thing into mental ideas. These forms were not for Plato mental ideas but blueprints or patterns. But a blueprint alone can't produce anything. A maker is needed. So Plato had God, the Demiurge, existing apart from the essence blueprints, serve as the maker. He was like a divine chef who would follow an infinitely long recipe book to cook up the items on the menu for our universe. Theoretically, I suppose, the number of possible things must be close to infinite. The chef also had this amazing single ingredient call matter that could be used to produce all the items in the cookbook. Interestingly, the Demiurge wasn't the kind of deity one worshipped. He wasn't that interesting. It was the blueprints that were truly fascinating because through them one could understand the complex reality of the world. All the demiurge provided was muscle, what we would call energy. It's also interesting that Aristotle's God couldn't really be worshipped. He or It was a divine mainspring mechanism that kept the world operating but was totally deaf to any form of prayer.

What the JudeoChristianity did was to insert the cookbook into God's mind. This was theologically beneficial in a number of ways. Perhaps most important it gave rational plausibility to God's creation of the universe. By using Plato's philosophy to describe how God did it, the divine creative process seemed more believable. It also gave JudeoChristians a handle on the nature of God. Though essence of God "himself" was/is absolutely unknowable, at least worshipers could read "his" mind. Any God that not only thought about oranges and butterflies but created them so humans could enjoy them had to be both powerful and benevolent. Finally, if it is assumed that the things of this world were created from God's ideas (in addition to benefit humans), then there must have been a creator. Consequently, Plato's theory of forms or ideas could be used as a persuasive argument for the existence of God.

Now let's go back to Plato and his heavenly blueprints used by the divine Demiurge to create all the things of the world. The root of the word *Demiurge* is worker. Thus, as noted earlier, this divinity isn't very interesting, not nearly as interesting as Zeus, Apollo, Dionysus, Hera, Aphrodite, Artemis. Athena, Demeter, so many cool goddesses. These divine characters are interesting in the way people are because they are humans writ large. They have lives. They interact with one another the way humans do, even mingle with humans. Their combined lives are an Olympian soap opera. They are psychologically complex and fascinating, in part because they reveal just how humans behave when they acquire extraordinary power—often selfishly and destructively. Undoubtedly, a lot can be learned

about people by studying the gods, who are basically deified humans. That goes for Yahweh as well.

In Plato's worldview what is most interesting is what can be known. So for him what is most interesting are the forms or essences of things (what they are). Plato thinks like a scientist in that he is all about knowing the world. However, his big mistake was believing a person could know all about the world just by thinking and confabulating with other thinkers. He believed that because he assumed that within a person's soul there was a hidden file cabinet that contained all the information about the world. So unlike for his star student Aristotle, empirical investigation and observation were not essential to learning about the world. Okay, so the abstract forms or essences depict precisely the reality of things. In a sense, they provide the kind of information you get when you look up something like a peach (*Prunus persica*) on *Wikipedia*, though the encyclopedia definition also includes lots of empirical information. Peaches are wonderful entities, and, as *Wikipedia* illustrates, have even inspired beautiful works of art. The dictionary even tells us that the word *peach* is used to describe a person who is excellent, as in "She's a peach." And there is the Americanism—*peachy keen*, excellent, fine, or worthy.

However, being a philosopher (a lover of knowledge) Plato was more interested in the idea than the thing itself. As the reader knows peaches can be appreciated in various ways. And perhaps Plato himself would have valued an actual peach more highly had he the opportunity to see and eat one. But this is my main point: without the essences or forms of things to contemplate, Plato would have no *raison d'être* because there would be nothing for him to contemplate. He would be a rational soul floating about in the void. Even his artisan deity would be idle because he wouldn't have any blueprints to follow to make things. In other words, though Plato valued the formal rational abstracts of things above things themselves, which he considered to be only imperfect copies of the abstracts, the abstracts are the essences of the things that exist in this world.

So though Plato appears to desire to escape from the material world, actually what he is escaping to are purer expressions of the things of this world. Thus, what Plato really values, whether or not he admits it, are the things of this world. Yet, only a nutty professor would prefer their ghostly, disembodied forms to things themselves. The *Wikipedia's* formal description of a peach is hardly superior to an actual peach. Imagine reading about peaches but being unable to experience a real peach. That would be dissatisfying. If Americans had driven bison into extinction, as they tried to do and almost did, being able to read about them would hardly compensate for the lost of the species. Back to peaches, knowing about peaches does not compare to holding, smelling, seeing, and eating one. If Plato would think so, then he would be a fool. There are non-existing, imaginary beings such as unicorns that we can know, though what we know are imagined descriptions of them. Yet, actual horses are far more meaningful than imaginary unicorns—just as human beings are more meaningful than angels (and though the Bible refers to innumerable angels, in the Book of Daniel "ten thousand times ten thousand," I have never encountered a single one).

So Plato was wrong to believe that the formal blueprint of a thing is superior to the thing itself. I believe most people would agree a fifty-dollar bill that can be spent is superior to the idea of a hundred-dollar bill. So what is most interesting and enjoyable to know in Plato's divine workshop is not god but the ideas god uses to create to fashion the world. And the same

can be true for the JudeoChristian god. All JudeoChristians, as far as I know, believe the ideas for all the things found in the universe first originated in the mind of God. “He” didn’t just stumble upon them. If they didn’t originate in God’s mind, then the JudeoChristian god would not be any more interesting than Plato’s Demiurge. But what’s left if those ideas are separated from God “himself”? JudeoChristianity does say that the essence of God is other than the ideas “he” used to create the universe. That makes sense. A peach and God are different entities even if God created the peach. One could argue that the goodness of the peach reflects God’s goodness and the existence of peaches reflects God’s generosity. But then there are all those things that are not so good for humans, such as deadly bacteria, viruses, funguses, poisonous insects and animal, crop-eating insects, etc. *Wikipedia* provides a long list of bacterial, viral, and fungal diseases that afflict peaches. So perhaps it’s better for our image of God to separate “him” completely from the things of this world, though that’s probably not possible.

But then what is left? JudeoChristians tell us that God is *pure being, pure act, self-sufficient, and free*. You probably know the story about the emperor who wore no clothes, written by Hans Christian Andersen, but nobody would tell him for fear of being chastised. But a child blurts out that the emperor is wearing no clothes. Well, I’m going to play here the role of that child. God is *pure being*. The notion pure being is nonsense, though JudeoChristian philosophers have worked very hard to make sense of this nonsensical notion. Why? Because the being of God must, of course, be pure. The word *being* in this sense is to treat the verb *to be* as a gerund, that is, as a noun. *To ski* can be treated as a noun: skiing, the activity. But the root of *being* is to be, to exist in some manner or way. So peaches *are* because they exist. Skiing *is* because the activity exists. A dog can *be* fat, fat being an existing characteristic. All things have being in that they exist in some manner, even unicorns exist if only in the imagination. But there is no being apart from some existing thing. So we can say of a peach that it is, meaning that it exists. We can also say a peach is pinkish-yellowish, is sweet, is easily bruised, etc., because these qualities are (exist) in the peach. Now the Jews have God define himself as the “I am that I am.” How about *the is that is*? You see God can’t be an entity, which would limit “him,” (more accurately It). So God is pure being, the is that is. Or the No-thing that is. God is unlike the rest of us poor creatures because “he” gets to be without being anything in particular. God is radically special, radically other. That’s why I have nothing in common with “him.” I prefer the sweet and beautiful company of a peach to that of a divine No-thing. I have far more in common with a peach than I do with God.

And what about this *pure act*? First of all, how does a No-thing act at all? The Bible and JudeoChristianity have God doing all sorts of things—inflicting populations with hailstorms, droughts, and plagues, even putting a mind-lock on the pharaoh. So who is doing all this? The mysterious *I am that I am*. God is supposed to be pure act, yet these acts are not pure (certainly not in the moral sense) but concrete and specific. To be pure act is not, I would think, to engage in any particular action.

For example, Aristotle thought God spent his time thinking. Thinking is thinking, not a pure act. And by the way, what does a thinking god think about? One would expect things that transcend human understanding—godly things. Logically, however, to be totally other (in no way anthropomorphic like Yahweh, the master of negative thinking), God should not be thinking about ordinary things because that’s what humans do. Why would “he” think about

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peaches? If God does engage in the anthropomorphic activity of thinking, then would expect “him” to be thinking divine thoughts, but what would those be? Not surprisingly, thoughts that transcend human conception and understanding. Nevertheless, because such thoughts are out of reach of the human mind, I will put them into the same category as the non-existing clothes Andersen’s emperor wears.

Getting back to God’s being pure act, imagine the action of skiing without a skier. If that sounds absurd, so does the pure act God supposedly engages in, and apparently has engaged in for an eternity.

God is *self-sufficient* because if God depended on something else for “his” existence, then that something else would be God. Actually, that line of reasoning doesn’t make sense. Human are not self-sufficient but that doesn’t make gods of the things—matter, sunlight, peaches, etc.—that human depend on. And of course God is the self-sufficient entity that everything else depends on. It’s like the Thanksgiving dinner that is made possible by ingredients provided by nature—but of course both they and nature were provided by the Great Provider, the *I am that I am*. Imagine a man riding in a buggy pulled by a horse. Since all things are sustained by the Unsustained Sustainer the buggy cannot be pulled by the horse alone but requires God’s effort as well. Thus, the buggy is being pulled by a horse that is being pulled by God. That sounds really far out, but that is exactly what JudeoChristians mean, such as where Friar Emonet says, “In touching by his motion the immense, teeming population of beings, God thrusts them forward.” (21) Emonet is claiming here that the Pure Act of God is the cause of the continuing coming into being of all animate and inanimate entities—from fleas to stars.

This notion goes back to the idea of God being the prime (first) mover. The idea isn’t that of the deists: God building the machine called the Universe and afterward allowing it to run on its own. Rather it’s the clockwork idea with God serving as the mainspring (which is self-winding). God’s influence is communicated throughout the entire mechanism, in our case the Universe. This involves not only motion but existence: God as the unsustained sustainer. Included in the prime mover idea is that God is the Unmoved Mover. “He” moves all other things without moving himself. Imagine the horse pulling the buggy without moving its legs. Right away the child screams the emperor has no clothes because this doesn’t make any sense. The JudeoChristian solution is the invention of intermediary beings such as the *Logos*, angels, and intelligences; however, given that these beings are immaterial it’s not clear how they do their work pushing and pulling material entities. Like gravity, I suppose, but without the material source of gravity. Anyway, I find these entities as simply more items in the emperor’s invisible wardrobe.

Finally, God is *free*. Well of course “he” is. If “he” weren’t then “he” wouldn’t be God. This is a good example of how the God word-game is played. In all things God, by definition, is superior thus follows a list of superlatives, all of which must be positive, though it does make one wonder why this most superlative being created the endless list of bad things—not only the very long list of diseases but devils and demons as well. In any case, God cannot not be free. “He” can do anything—right? Like make material beings without matter, create a squircle (a square that is also a circle), and make  $4 + 4 = 9$ .

I digressed, but like the child in Andersen’s story I felt I had to express my opinion that all such God talk amounts to is nothing but words. However, those words are like magic.

They can make persons believe they see something that really isn't there. The early JudeoChristian fathers wrote endless works against the pagans, in particular their philosophies, and against JudeoChristians whose beliefs they considered to be heretical. They accuse such thinkers of sophistical reasoning, that is, using methods of argumentation that seem plausible though are actually invalid and misleading. These arguments usually do not have the intent to deceive; they are fallacious simply because they do not agree with the dogma of the Church, backed up by the arms of the JudeoChristian state. My gun is deadlier than your stick so what I say is right. To rephrase the ancient Greek sophist Thrasymachus, "the truth belongs to the strongest."

But JudeoChristians also claim that because of the weakness of the human intellect, the full and complete truth cannot be achieved by reason alone. I find the notion of the "weakness of the human intellect" ludicrous given the remarkable understanding of the world the human intellect has achieved since it so recently freed itself from the bondage of state-enforced superstition. Besides, what is weak about not being able to know the unknowable? That's a logical impossibility. So where is *the Truth* to come from? Revelation, which is God's communication to a select few, such as Abraham and Moses. And of course the truth of the revelation has to be taken on faith, that the receiver of the revelation isn't just lying or himself deceived. Clearly such means of obtaining the truth isn't rational. But I find it somewhat presumptuous to claim that revelation is a superior method of discovering the truth than good, old fashion empirical, logical reasoning. And the unavoidable question is just what kind of information has revelation provided? About God, that Jesus is God, that there are angels and devils, and that all of humanity will be going to either Heaven or Hell. As far as I'm concern all that is more of the emperor's clothes. One need only compare how much useful truth science has provided compared to that of revelation, i.e., the truth superstition provides.

What does revelation or word juggling tell us about God? That "he" and the blueprints he imagined are separate. By the way, they must be separate because God is consider simple—no parts. Another difficult notion to wrap your head around. If God consisted of parts then God would become very messy. The parts could be compared and one part might be superior to the other (as in the case of the Ideas used as blueprints being superior to the Demiurge). Or they might be equal but then if separated would they both be Godly to the same degree as when combined? An earthworm can be cut in half resulting in two earthworms (I believe that's how it works). And would having parts make God a hodgepodge of attributes? Actually that is exactly what humans are. But you see then the hand can be compared to the nose and the nose to the eyes, and so on. In humans some parts are better than others. I would rather lose my hair than my eyes. But all the parts of God would have to have equal and absolute value, meaning each part would be of the same value as God as a whole. And that doesn't work. This is the sort of thing that happens when you get into a conversation with the emperor about his clothes.

But let's finish the game. In addition to the attribute mentioned above, God doesn't occupy space, so "he's" *nowhere* (no place) to be found, but let's not go there. God's essence transcends all the attributes associated with "him" (including gender). If God is to be absolutely otherworldly, that is, transcendent, then "he" must remain separate from any attribute that can be conceptualized. Given that nothing essentially or positively can be known about God, one approach that has been offered is the *Via Negativa*, getting to know

sent by God to be used by human beings as they see fit. That which has the greatest value is the maker and giver of the fruit basket. And compared to “his” big cosmic plan—the destruction of the world, judgment, and sentencing humanity to Heaven or Hell—life on earth has only secondary, relative, importance. Its value is also that of utility—to determine who goes to Heaven and who goes to Hell. With those two destinations awaiting humanity how could life on earth have absolute, inherent value? If Heaven and Hell are only products of the human imagination, then earth regains inherent value, and God ceases to matter.

But World War I in its grotesque way freed Jake Barnes from the myth of JudeoChristianity. In a sense, Jake is like Plato’s prisoner who lives in a cave with many other prisoners. All they can see are shadows. In Jake’s case the shadows are the figures of the JudeoChristian myth. Freed from the cave of mythology Jake is able to see the JudeoChristian myth for what it is—a myth. This isn’t a pleasant experience because the myth is the creation of pure wish fulfillment. It offers an idealized view of reality in which the believer has two cosmic parents—Yahweh and Jesus—who look after them in this life and have prepared a place for them in an afterlife. Equally important this life has an absolute cosmic purpose defined by the creator of the universe. A couple times in the story Jake attempts to reclaim the make-believe JudeoChristian dream but he cannot. He is like an adult who longs for his childhood. But what Jake rediscovers is the earth and the absolute value of life in the here and now.<sup>319</sup> His war injury prevents him from

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God by knowing what God isn’t. Going through that list could take some time given everything in the universe is on it. But one still ends up with a divine No-thing. The theologian John Scot Erigena put it this way, “We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God is not, because He transcends being.” So the road to God lead nowhere because God is nowhere to be found. There does seem to be a BIG CONTRADICTION here, given all the superlative labels attached to God. But it’s not my game. But that’s why God ineffable. Okay, so if God is absolutely other than all the essences used to make the things of the world and anything else that can be said of “him,” what’s left? Nothing! And that nothing is supposed to be superior and more desirable than all the wonderful things that make up our solar system and especially those earthly entities? I don’t buy it. I’ll take my peach any day over the divine No-thing. The peach is one of nature’s, not God’s, miracles.

<sup>319</sup> Children know this intuitively. They are at one with the world. They don’t require God to make life a meaningful and joyful experience. The religious indoctrination of JudeoChristianity results in a state of forgetfulness that is tragic because it is a myth that causes disenchantment with the mundane world that is humanity’s lifeworld. And for what? To inhabit a fantasy. It is amazing that humans can be persuaded (indoctrinated) to prefer a ghost world to the real world so gloriously celebrated by poets, painters, photographers, explorers, naturalists, and scientists. Kierkegaard illustrates this enchantment when he says, “The reason that I like autumn so much more than spring is that one looks at heaven in the autumn—in the spring one looks at the earth.” (Garff 97) Clearly, Kierkegaard is not expressing the sentiment of an astronomer but that of a theologian.

physically realizing his love for Brett, but it also reminds him of the absolute value of lovemaking. Because the earth is all that he has, it matters absolutely.

### **Dante's Journey into the Mind of the JudeoChristian God**

Dante and Bashō: two journeys, two worldviews. As I am about to turn to Bashō, who I believe best exhibits the celebration of the earth and life in this world, I cannot help but thinking of Dante and his other worldly journey described in the *Divine Comedy*. It should be noted that one is a journey taken on foot by the author in this world. It is real—empirical and historical. The other is taken on foot but in the imagination. Imagined worlds and imagined events are all JudeoChristianity can offer when describing what it celebrates, the supernatural.

In the *Divine Comedy* Dante takes us on a journey of make-believe much of which is grotesque and horrific, yet it clearly reveals the dark heart of JudeoChristianity. And it is, if you will, an exploration of the cave Jake was evicted from by the war. To me Dante's journey is meaningless because it's based on mythology yet lacks the enchanting quality of Greek myths. As with Emonet, all of reality and human existence matter only in relation to God, a fantasy, and not a very pleasant one. It is true that the journey does reveal the very many ways human beings can go awry, but that would also include the mythic thinking Dante's journey is based on. The story is also important

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When Jesus says in Matthew, “Verily I say unto you, except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.” (18:3) his intended meaning is erroneous: That a person better become “humble” and sinless if he or she wants to avoid being “cast into everlasting fire” (18:8) rather than going to Heaven. Jesus commands that we “Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones” (18:10), yet he introduces terror into their lives with his horrific threat of eternal punishment.

However, from a Romantic point of view Jesus' statement makes unintended good sense—that children can be teachers to men who live in forgetfulness. The Romantics pointed out that by becoming adults people can lose the joyful enthusiasm for life that they had as children.\* The lesson is that adults shouldn't forget to enjoy life as they did when they were children. The interesting thing about children is that they really require very little to be happy. However, *The Sun Also Rises* reminds the reader that the greatest threat to childhood happiness is the harmful behavior of adults, in particular that of men. The Great War was a tragic event for millions of children. And today, 2015, the behavior of men has changed little. In many parts of the world, they continue to make life a living hell for millions of women and children.

\*William Blake's poem “The Schoolboy” expresses the idea that society to take control of a person's life that can result in the person being engaged in societal institutions and indoctrinations that prevent him or her from freely exploring the world as a child would. Certainly, education can have the effect of opening or closing a child's mind—depending on how and what a child is taught. In the present context, the religious indoctrination of JudeoChristianity results in the child being engaged in a religious myth from within which the real, mundane world (declared to be in a fallen state) is truly seen “through a glass, darkly.”



because it offers a journey that reveals the twisted, self-obsessed, and unjust mind of the JudeoChristian god.

The central theme of the *Divine Comedy* is punishment and reward, and that's because that is the main theme of the Abrahamic faiths. Good behavior (obedience to God) is rewarded; bad behavior (failing to act in accordance with God's expectations) is severely punished. Actually, the greatest reward in God's Heaven (Paradise) is not being punished. But God's punishment is rarely just. For example, in the Second Circle of the Inferno those who betrayed reason to their appetites are being punished. There you find Dido and Achilles. Dido vowed to remain faithful to her husband but then fell in love with Aeneas, who spurned her so she committed suicide. Achilles supposedly was willing to abandon the Greeks for the love of Polyxena. His love for her resulted in both their deaths. One would expect that Romeo and Juliet would also be punished in the Second Circle of Hell for their unbridled love. The punishment for those who "betrayed reason to their appetite" (emotional and carnal) is to dwell forever in darkness and be whipped and whirled about by storms, symbols of their unbridled passions. Their suffering moves Dante to tears. In the notes of his translation of the *Divine Comedy* John Ciardi tells us that it is a place for those "who sinned by excess of sexual passion." The issue here is not simply lust and passion clouding reason but JudeoChristianity's vilification of the flesh and sexuality.

Heartbroken Dido committed suicide. Cleopatra, who also dwells in Second Circle, did as well. Had these impassioned lovers not been sentenced to the Second Circle, they would have been sentenced to the seventh, which is for suicides. We can assume the same for the young suicides Romeo and Juliet. In Dante's hell, suicides have their souls incased in trees and bleed when Harpies tear the leaves. They can speak only through the bloody wounds. One of them is Pietro della Vigna, who had been a skillful and trustworthy Italian jurist and diplomat. The master he served so loyally, Emperor Frederick II, had him sent to prison, put in chains, and then his eyes gouged out. Either out of disgrace or fear of further torture he killed himself by bashing his head upon the floor. One would think this poor man had suffered enough.

Isn't that the case for most suicides—that they are driven by desperation to kill themselves? Della Vigna's suffering causes Dante's heart to be choked by compassion. Virgil finds it necessary to scold Dante for pitying those whom God in "his" infinite wisdom has damned. We are reminded of Moses' having to appeal to God to have mercy on his people, as during the Golden Calf episode. The truth is, God's behavior is rarely just, but especially unjust in "his" punishment of suicides, people most deserving of pity. God is often praised as the greatest source of love; however, "his" punishment of suicides is heartless.

And then there's the Third Circle where the gluttons are punished by having to live forever in a world where it rains something like icy vomit and where they are constantly ripped apart by the three-headed dog Cerberus. We Americans live in an age of gluttony and other forms of physical excess, and one can argue that such people abuse

not only themselves but society as well because their medical care inflicts upon society an avoidable financial burden and uses medical resources that could be used to treat people afflicted with unavoidable diseases. Still, their punishment in Dante's Hell is cruel and unjust. Such people are punished in this world, and we know that excessive consumption of food and drink are often symptoms of psychological and emotional disorders. In some cases they are labeled eating disorders. In other words, such people are sick, not evil. But theirs is an affliction of the flesh, so hated by the Judeo-Christian God—who being made of spirit is indifferent to the desires of the flesh and the excesses they can lead to.

In the Fifth Circle we find the wrathful and the sullen. The wrathful wade in slime angrily striking and biting one another. If wrath's a sin, certainly the Yahweh belongs here. In the Old Testament we find that Yahweh's wrath is repeatedly provoked. In the Book of Numbers when certain Levite priests challenge Moses' dictatorial behavior, Yahweh has the ground open up and swallow "them up, with their households."<sup>320</sup> Of course, most famously Yahweh floods the world because he is disappointed by human behavior. That alone qualifies him to suffer with the other wrathful in the Fifth Circle of Hell, but of course it's his show so he is above even "his" own law.

However, it's the punishment of the sullen that I find most unjust here. They must dwell beneath the murky slime and gurgle the explanation for their crime—to have remained sullen when they once lived in "the air made sweet by the Sun." In other words, their sullen nature caused them not to appreciate what God had given them. Could it be that these solitary, morose souls suffered some form of mental illness?

One final example Dante's journey into the punitive mind of Yahweh, we find Epicurus suffering in the Six Circle, the section of Hell reserved for heretics, which is strange given Epicurus lived almost three centuries before Jesus was born. When Dante looks about the Six Circle he sees "a countryside of sorrow and new torment." The heretics are incased in metal tombs ringed with fire. Virgil tells Dante that these are arch-heretics of all cults. These heretics either denied God's existence, or in Epicurus' case denied that the soul survived after death. Not only is Epicurus there but so are all his followers. That would include the great Roman poet Lucretius.

The irony here is that of all the philosophers of the ancient world—with perhaps the exception of Buddha—Epicurus was most concerned with helping people avoid suffering and to achieve happiness. He wanted people to know that the soul doesn't survive after death so there is no reason to fear what might come in the afterlife—such as the horror show of Dante's descriptions of Hell. Epicurus argued that the soul is a rarified stuff that disperses once death occurs. The idea of the soul being an immaterial, unified substance didn't make logical sense. It seemed contradictory that the immaterial

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<sup>320</sup> It's in such passages that we see the dictatorial nature of Judaism, which led to the Catholic Church becoming the world's first totalitarian institution.

substance of the soul could animate a material body. In other words, the soul would be like ghosts that pass through walls and cannot be embraced because they are visual nothings. Certainly there exist ghost like forces such as gravity and magnetism, but they do not exist independent of the body. Even Aristotle recognized that apart from the body the soul no longer exists. Epicurus would have asked how do souls possess the five senses, as they do in the *Divine Comedy* given the senses are physical organs. And if souls are spiritual bodies then I ask why did God bother with using bodies in the first place? Finally, if the soul is this unified essentially pure, unchanging substance, then why does intellect grow lame, the tongue rave, the mind stumble, and all things fail and decline at the same time.<sup>321</sup>

Of course JudeoChristianity requires the soul if there is to be punishment in the afterlife. It is essentially a punitive religion. Dante tells us that each circle is a nation of lost souls. It's telling that there are so many souls in Hell and so few in Heaven. There is a dramatic drop in numbers as one approaches the top. This tells me that God's design of creation is terribly flawed given the enormous amount of suffering that it leads to. Compared to God, Hitler is a saint. At least he killed his victims. And then there are those armies of demonic forces scouring the earth to cause Hell-bound havoc. Really, Yahweh has stacked the cards against humanity. Perhaps "he" didn't want Paradise to become an overcrowded ghetto filled with decent but otherwise undistinguished souls, resulting in Paradise losing its VIP status.

Getting back to Epicurus, were he God he would have done away with punishment in the afterlife. He was against pain and suffering. His science, understanding of human nature, worldview, and purpose in life was far superior to that of Saint Thomas, who gets to enjoy habitation in the Fourth Sphere of Paradise. Like JudeoChristianity, Epicurus welcomed women and slaves to his garden academy but he gave them an equal role to play, but did so centuries before JudeoChristianity. And unlike the elitist and chauvinistic Catholic Church, Epicurus' school was an egalitarian institution. Certainly, the Church was greatly responsible for women having to wait until the 19<sup>th</sup> century to attend college. In all likelihood, Epicurus would prefer to be in Hell with the those unhappy sinners than in a VIP section of Paradise. His sympathy was with the people, not with God.

### **Returning to Reality: Bashō's Earthly Journeys**

But now, like Jake in the *Sun Also Rises*, we emerge from the nightmarish cave of JudeoChristianity and return to the bosom of the earth. Our guide will be the poet Matsuo Bashō and his collection of travel sketches.<sup>322</sup> Bashō was not like the Romantic

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<sup>321</sup> See Long's discussion of Epicurus' thinking concerning the soul, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 49-53.

<sup>322</sup> I will be using *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*, wonderfully translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa, who also provides a very helpful introduction and notes. I also rely on Makoto Ueda's invaluable *The Master Haiku Poet: Matsuo Bashō*.

poets who believed nature to be a manifestation of some spiritual entity such as the Absolute Spirit or Emerson's Oversoul. True to his Taoist and Buddhist roots, Bashō did not see humanity as the *raison d'être* of the world's existence. His thinking is similar to the ancient Greeks, who believed that human beings were simply one species among numerous others, some more powerful (the gods or forces of nature), some less so. As with thinkers such as Epicurus there is an underlying nihilism in Bashō's worldview. That nihilism is rooted in existence's lack of purpose beyond what humans and other creatures give it and in the nothingness from which the beings of existence emerge and to which they must return.

Reality is like the landscapes in Chinese landscape painting, an evanescent dreamscape, in part because its most delightful qualities are given to it by the perceiver—qualities of color, sound, odor, taste, and tactility. As Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius understood, beneath the kaleidoscopic forms are void and atoms, but mostly void. To human beings the reality of the earth is solid, but that is somewhat of an illusion. The solid stuff of the earth is solid compared to the flesh of living creatures. A rock can be pulverized into dust, and the dust into elements that can be evaporated into smaller particles. At the heart of the earth is an enclosed sea of metal. To a neutrino the insides of the human body would look like what we see when we look at the stars—mostly space sprinkled with atomic particles.

One of Bashō's poems from Yuasa's introduction says,

At midnight  
Under the bright moon  
A secret worm  
Digs into a chestnut. <sup>323</sup>

Bashō would travel on foot for days to see a harvest moon or cherry blossoms—both being exquisite expressions of nature, yet within the seed of creation is a worm—the worm of nothingness, not pure nothingness, of course, but primordial materials and forces that are so primitive that they are in themselves meaningless. That is the midnight under, above, and all around the bright moon.

Another poem by Bashō says,

Against the brushwood gate  
Dead tea leaves swirl  
In the stormy wind. <sup>324</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> Bashō, Yuasa translation, 27.

<sup>324</sup> Bashō, Ueda translation, 24.

A stormy wind is what the universe has always been, and even the earth. But out of that wind emerges beautiful forms, moons, cherry blossoms, crickets, and humans—the swirl of dead tea leaves. If one is looking for reassurance and a big silver lining to existence, he or she won't find it in Bashō. What Bashō learned over time was to accept the world for what it is, and it is wonderful, but to try to make more of it than what is there is not only to lie to oneself but to fail to fully understand and appreciate the world, its natural and human aspects.

Certainly, we would like it to be otherwise, as Jake wishes his situation were other than what it is. His injury symbolizes the insurmountable limitations that are part of the human condition. The title of the story is both depressing and reassuring. Tomorrow is a new day, a new beginning that offers new opportunities. And Jake makes the most of his tomorrows. However, the sun also rises upon much suffering, injustices, and tragedy to which it, like the universe itself, is indifferent. Those who care must themselves be able to suffer. That is one of the insights of JudeoChristianity: only a god that is vulnerable to suffering can truly relate to humanity. Jesus Christ humanizes the universe. He is a response to the despair expressed by the preacher in the Book of Ecclesiastes. But the story of Jesus Christ is a fairy tale for grownups. His coming and going made no difference except to give humanity false hope. Bashō brings us back down to earth. One of his poems, which echoes the Book of Ecclesiastes and Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, expresses the indifference of the universe to the suffering of the very creatures it bring to life:

Red, red is the sun,  
Heartlessly indifferent to time,  
The wind knows, however,  
The promise of early chill.<sup>325</sup>

The sun is both creator and destroyer—it gives life and it takes life. And in the future it will expand into a Red Giant to consume the earth. All this is neither evil nor good in the moral sense. It's just the way of things. The mention of time is significant because the sun is often associated with time. And like the sun, time is a principle of reality that is both creative and destructive. It is through time that creation takes place. Bashō journeys, writes, and paints in time. However, real time, embodied material flesh of the

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<sup>325</sup> Bashō, Yuasa translation, 133. The following is a translation of the poem that closer to the original haiku:

bright red  
the pitiless sun  
autumn winds

This translation was taken from <http://thegreenleaf.co.uk/HP/basho/00Bashohaiku.htm>

universe, is finite, meaning that for everything death is unavoidable. In the poem the “early chill” is the approach of autumn. When the poem was written Bashō himself was approaching the autumn of his life. His health was beginning to fail and many of the poems that follow are melancholy in tone and reflect that Bashō’s meditation on death.

The following poem taken from Ueda’s collection sums up the inescapable destination of all things:

many sad junctures—  
in the end, everyone turns into  
a bamboo shoot.<sup>326</sup>

For Bashō there is no glorious end-of-life resurrection to look forward to, no elevation to a higher spiritual state of existence. At best one’s flesh will be recycled by nature into another natural form such as a bamboo shoot.

However, I believe that Bashō’s authentic acceptance of death enables him to appreciate the things of this world more profoundly than is possible for JudeoChristians, who value the things of the earth for their use value and as expressions of God’s love for humanity. For Bashō the universality of death creates a heartfelt equality among all things. The above poem refers to the death of a woman named Kogo, a favorite concubine of Emperor Takakura. In death she is replaced by bamboo shoots. To Bashō’s mind the finitude of both give them equal fundamental value. But the poem also reminds us that the sting of death is lessened by the appearance of new life. And in their way, the bamboo shoots are as precious and beautiful as was the concubine.<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> 313.

<sup>327</sup> It is terrifying that so much beauty ends in death—all beauty not just some. The earth and all of its animate and inanimate inhabitants will have completely perished early in the universe’s history. Stars will continue to form and die for billions of more years, though scientists tell us today that the universe’s present star production is only 3 percent of what it used to be and that 95 percent of the stars the universe will ever make have already been made.\* But to my mind a star is less precious than a flower, with which I have more in common. Still, without stars there would be no flowers. In the end the universe will grow dark and empty. Such absence is terrifying, more so than one’s own death. Bashō sought to come to grips with death. JudeoChristians never confront death. Their myth is designed so that they may avoid doing so. Yet, for that reason, they can never fully appreciate life or their own being in the world.

\*The information about declining star production comes from Dennis Overbye’s November 19, 2012, *New York Times*’ article “Amid Cosmic Fatigue, Scarcely a Star is Born.”

In the following poem the sun casts a more reassuring light:

At sunrise I saw  
Tanned faces of fishermen  
Among the flowers  
Of white poppy.<sup>328</sup>

With the death of God, the sun continues to rise and nature to be reborn. The poem reveals the essence of existence as it is revealed to the poet. The sun is the focal point of the solar system. Its energy makes life possible and its light reveals the world to consciousness. If there is a god, it is the sun—provider and revealer.

Also revealed is the essence of life, which is the struggle to survive. Fishermen contend with sea in order to extract from it the life that will sustain them. Fish do the same. Humans, fish, and flowers are all the same in their struggle to survive. Yet, for humans there is beauty. The sea, its fish, flowers, and fishermen all have beauty, each in its own way. The sun shines equally upon all them. The fishermen have no greater value in the natural scheme of things than do the flowers. What is unique to humans is the ability to understand and appreciate. That is represented by the poem itself and the invisible presence of the poet. And as the fishermen are linked to the poppies, the poet is linked to the sun. Both the sun and the poet are revealers.

The scene described by the above poem could easily be interpreted in a sentimental, romanticized fashion, but Bashō prevents that in the text that follows the poem. There he describes crows diving down and grabbing small fish that have been spread out on the sand to dry. The fishermen shoot the crows with arrows. The following is the resulting poem:

Off the sharp point  
Of a fisherman's arrow  
I heard the cry  
Of a wild cuckoo.<sup>329</sup>

Bashō cleverly directs the poem away from depicting a crow being pierced by an arrow. The cry of the cuckoo expresses the pain felt by a crow shot with an arrow. Yet, without graphic realism the poem succeeds in conveying in its reader a feeling of distress. That distress comes from the reader's sympathy for the crows, which are only seeking food and otherwise seem harmless. Bashō himself wonders "why these people still resorted to such a cruel means without the slightest sense of guilt." I believe his thought is

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<sup>328</sup> Yuasa translation, 88.

<sup>329</sup> Yuasa translation, 89.

somewhat rhetorical, intended to cause readers to discover for themselves whether they agree with the poet.

On the surface the fishermen's behavior might seem cruel, yet the crows are a threat to their survival. In a way, moral judgment is out of place here. From a naturalistic perspective, that of Darwin's theory of evolution, for example, this is the way of life—species feed off one another. Both humans and crows feed off of fish and the fish feed off of other organisms. Yet, Bashō does not allow the poem to dwell on the brutality that is an inherent part of nature. Instead, he deflects off the sharp point of the fisherman's arrow the cry of the wild cuckoo. The sublime character of nature is its mixture of beauty and brutality.

It's easy to condemn nature for brutal elements, but to do so is unjust. There is no other way for nature. Yet, if a conscious, all-powerful creator is inserted into the picture, then "he" can be blamed for nature's brutal aspects because "he" could have and should have designed it to be less cruel and painful. And just as a creator god can be condemned for causing or allowing excessive pain, suffering, and sorrow, so can humanity be condemned. In fact, the scene brings to Bashō the thought of bloody war, and he decides to visit a place where a battle had taken place. The path to place is steep, rocky, and treacherous, so much so that his young guide does not wish to take him there. The truth is a difficult path to follow. Here it leads to the realization that humanity is fatally flawed in its inability to avoid warfare. It is a sad realization because war seems to be part of the human condition. Like Jake Barnes and even Hemingway, Bashō sought in nature a mean of escaping the often demoralizing presence of human beings. In nature there is violence but it seems necessary and restrained. Few species engage in internecine warfare.

Such realizations cause Bashō to feel sad and lonely even to weep. Then he'll seek beauty in nature, such as in the later poem:

It was with awe  
That I beheld  
Fresh leaves, green leaves,  
In the bright sun.<sup>330</sup>

Such a scene isn't reassuring. What it does is to remind the reader of the goodness and beauty that also dwell in nature. There can't be reassurance, other than life generally continues. Nature is what it is. Humans tamed aspects of nature to serve them and have created artificial habitats to protect themselves from forces of nature. Yet, the larger forces of nature remain untamed and humans have always been the greatest destroyers of the habitats they built to protect themselves. One does not have to go too far back in

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<sup>330</sup> Yuasa translation, 100.



history to find towns built as fortresses. But that's the way reality is—both enchanting and disappointing.

World War I, World War II, and the many wars that have followed; the Holocaust and the dropping of atomic bombs that killed mostly civilians; the continuing development of nuclear weapons, especially by countries that decry their existence; and the many ongoing conflicts around the world today—all are evidence that the reality of nature, including human nature, is unchanging. Unfortunately, morality doesn't change human nature, and human behavior suggests that morality is barely able to keep it in check. More than morality, the pleasure-pain principle seems to influence human behavior most. People avoid doing wrong not because it's wrong but because doing wrong may result in some form of pain such as going to prison or Hell. The behavior of other species, ironically, appears to be morally superior to that of humans. A satiated crow will cease stealing fish and lions don't kill for sport and rarely kill members of their own species. And compared to human behavior, that of herbivores seems almost saintly.

Unlike JudeoChristians, Bashō doesn't excuse evil by claiming it's an aberration (sinful behavior) or that it doesn't really exist but is merely the absence of good. The goal of which is to interpret evil in such a way as to get an all-good, all-powerful God off the responsibility hook. How could such a God create a world so full of pain and suffering without looking immoral "himself"? And all the bad stuff doesn't help the JudeoChristian design argument—that the design of the world is evidence for a divine designer. If the design is flawed, then the Designer is flawed in some way: Either "he" enjoys the pain-and-suffering show that goes on in the earthly realm or "he" simply isn't all-powerful or all-knowing. If "he" was, he would have done a better job of designing the world.

Bashō, on the other hand, simply accepts that as wonderful as nature and the earth are, neither is perfect. Nature's imperfection is symbolized by the Murder Stone that kills birds and insects that approach it. The Murder Stone, Bashō tells us, is wrapped in the poisonous gas rising from it and is surrounded by dead bees, butterflies, and other insects.<sup>331</sup> Bashō didn't include in the travelogue the poem inspired by the stone.<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> Bashō, Yuasa translation, 104-105.

<sup>332</sup> Makoto Ueda translates the poem in his terrific book *Bashō and His Interpreters* (Stanford U. Press, 1992, 235):

the stone's smell  
summer grasses look red,  
dewdrops warm.

The poem's eerie description of the stone conveys its malignant, unnatural nature without referring directly to its killing of insects.

Instead, the next line says that he departed to see a willow tree made famous by another poet. Once he finds it, he rests himself in its shade. He writes,

When the girls had planted  
A square of paddy-field,  
I stepped out of  
The shade of a willow tree. <sup>333</sup>

By resting under the willow tree and watching girls planting rice he returns to life's goodness. The Murder Stone is disconcerting in that at the surface of reality it may seem an aberration it actually reflects the more disturbing undercurrents of reality. It reminds the thoughtful viewer that all forms (entities) come into being and must return to nonbeing. Today we know that with greater certainty than Bashō did, in part because of our knowledge of the inescapable Second Law of Thermodynamics. So it's not surprising that Bashō would want to move on to a more joyful scene.

Bashō loved trees. He named himself after a banana plant. Not long after enjoying sitting beneath the willow tree, he encounters a celebrated pine tree. When he sees it, he says, "My heart leaped with joy when I saw the celebrated pine tree of Takekuma."<sup>334</sup>

One cannot allow oneself to dwell on evil or life's limitations because to do so can result in becoming disenchanted and depress. From what Makoto Ueda tells us, the tendency to become disillusioned was one that Bashō struggled with.<sup>335</sup> In a sense, his journeys were a personal yet also Buddha-inspired attempts to come to grips with suffering. The evil (that which causes suffering) will not go away, so one must somehow come to grips with it. Eventually Bashō does.

Just before enjoying the tree of Takekuma, Bashō tells us about suffering from an old complaint. It was a stormy night, the roof of the room where he was trying to sleep leaked, the room had no lamp, and he was under constant attack by mosquitoes, fleas, and this painful ailment. The next day he continued the journey on horseback, yet the pain continued. He then considered the possibility that he could die and concluded that should he die it would be the fulfillment of providence. And then he says, "I trod the earth as firmly as possible."<sup>336</sup> There's really nothing more to do. In Bashō one finds an underlying stoicism. He seems to have chosen to go on journeys in order to confront hardship, to seek it out and grapple with it in stoical fashion. His motivation wasn't masochistic but a quest that was both spiritual or personal and intellectual. He sought the answer to how does one endure suffering given that it's not completely avoidable? Eventually Bashō found the answers to that question.

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<sup>333</sup> Bashō, Yuasa translation, 105.

<sup>334</sup> Bashō, Yuasa translation, 111.

<sup>335</sup> *The Master Haiku Poet Matsuo Bashō*, Kodansha International, 1982, 25.

<sup>336</sup> Bashō, Yuasa translation, 110.

One should not demand from life those things one is unlikely to achieve. Fewer demands mean fewer disappointments. Of course, one has to have some goals in life. Bashō's was to become a successful poet. This goal gave his life meaning, a *raison d'être*. And actually it is a goal that a poet has a good deal of control over because successful poetry results mainly from the poet's own efforts. The fishermen, on the other hand, had to contend with weather, availability of fish, and fish-stealing crows. If fame is added to a poet's goal in life, then success becomes more problematic because fame depends on people responding favorably to the poet's poetry.

One should avoid overindulging—too much eating, drinking, or spending—because doing so usually results in unpleasant consequences. Thus one should live simply. Bashō did. I think one of his goals as a traveler was to learn to live simply. Hedonistic excess is certainly a problem for the “lost generation” in *The Sun also Rises*. In Bashō fashion, Jake seeks escape from the overindulging lifestyle of his friends by leaving the city to fish and to be among the simpler-living peasants. The difference between Jake and Bashō seems to be that though both men find profound meaning in the aesthetic experience, Bashō finds a spirituality in nature and in the way of life of those who live close to nature that isn't present for Jake. At some lovely spot in nature Bashō will often pray at a shrine. The gods he prays too seem to be the forces or entities of nature that the ancient Greeks worshipped. For Jake, beauty itself seems to be the spiritual dimension.

Finally, one has to learn to accept the bad with the good because some bad things are unavoidable, such as physical hurt, growing old, and eventually dying. The list is actually much longer. At times Bashō was disappointed by other people's behavior, such as by the fishermen killing crows. But people are free to do as they feel they must. A poet doesn't have to kill crows, but perhaps the fishermen must in order to survive. And the poet does eat the fish the fishermen kill. Othello makes the mistake of demanding that Desdemona meet his expectations, and actually she does. When he believes she is unfaithful he kills her. Such a response is not only unjust but increases suffering all around. One has to learn to accept that the world will never be, cannot be, exactly as one wants.

All the wisdom here can be found in the philosophies of the ancient Greek philosophers, such as the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. Plato taught that the passions and appetite should be guided by reason. Aristotle recommended living a complete life but one lived in moderation. Bashō enjoyed many things in life, not only natural beauty but other people from all walks of life, art, food, drink, and close friends. The Cynics warned not to get caught up in the artificial values of society, such as the pursuit of fame, fortune, and power.<sup>337</sup> If they lived today, they would most likely see

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<sup>337</sup> It is perhaps this world that Bashō's phrase “floating world” refers to. Jake's crowd comes to mind. His is a rootless culture of hedonistic play. I suppose either war or decadence resulting from excessive affluence can create such a culture. But today we know that technology can itself create a floating world of homes that are self-contained and

self-sufficient, automobiles that encapsulate motorists as they travel from point A to point B, big box stores where shoppers can do all their shopping in one place, town centre shopping malls that replace Main Street, and even entire communities designed as commercial centers. The emergence of the floating world is certainly tied to the physical growth of urban areas.

Godfrey Reggio's movie *Koyaanisqatsi* depicts poetically the transition from the organic (the animate-inanimate world of nature) to the urban (the artificial world of mankind). Toward the end of the movie one sees the floating world having encapsulated the human lifeworld. The substance of this world can be described as the concretization of the imaginary. It's real because it's concrete. It's imaginary because it's the product of the human imagination. Ironically, the floating or imaginary world is sustained by the primordial world of nature. Without the resources of nature, it would begin to die almost immediately. The floating world is something like an epiphenomenal reality that that is both disconnected yet totally dependent upon the primordial world. It is like an artificial species made up of subspecies. Perhaps an automobile is an artificial subspecies.

However, the issue here is that the floating world is disconnected from the primordial world, resulting in the citizens of the floating world being detached from primordial reality—the reality of everywhere else. The reality of the floating world reflects the interests of human beings. The reality of everywhere else doesn't. Thus the former can give a false impression of the latter. Understanding the floating world is not the same thing as understanding the primordial world, the true world only in that it is universal reality, not an epiphenomenal reality. And I believe Bashō is saying that one cannot fully understand and appreciate oneself, if one does not relate in some fundamental perhaps organic way to the primordial world. How else is one to understand himself or herself in the great scheme of things? But to do so requires leaving the floating world, at least for a time, in order to reestablish a connection with the other finite beings of the natural world. Only then is a bond established that reveals the absolute value of all of nature's inhabitants. Underlying this revelation is the understanding that nothing has absolute value in relation to the cosmos as a whole. Perhaps not even to nature, though I'm not sure considering nature's value-conferring creatures are part of nature. Animals that eat peaches must enjoy thus value them.

Bashō writes:

Few in this world  
Notice those blossoms:  
Chestnuts by the eaves.

Ueda says chestnut blossoms are not ostentatious. So what is suggested is that only someone like Bashō who would notice and value them has an especially sympatric connection with the organic world. The chestnut blossom is noticed not out of desire, as a peach would be by a hungry bird, or because the flower is extraordinary in shape and beauty. Bashō's awareness of the blossom would be infused with a sympathetic ontological understanding. The chestnut blossom is a fellow creature in time. That it is acknowledged—and most aren't because they're never seen—infuses the blossom with meaning and value.

It's ironic that though in contrast to the members of the floating world those who are rooted in the primordial organic world, such as rice planters and fishermen, may not

consumerism as a spirit destroying way of life that leads to frustration and unhappiness if Aristotle's principle of moderation is ignored. That principle became the guiding principle for the Epicureans. Life is inherently good because it gives pleasure. No secret ingredient needs to be sought. A tasty hamburger comes to mind. Life's a delicious hamburger, but skip the large fries and the malt; otherwise, you will just feel miserable (psychologically and physically) afterward. And don't expect spiritual enlightenment from a hamburger. Oh yes, don't eat alone. Loved ones and friends are essential to a happy life. This too was taken from Aristotle though was best illustrated by Socrates, who was never alone. In fact, Bashō rarely traveled alone. The wisdom of the ancient Greeks was not available to Bashō, but the wisdom of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism was. Bashō learned from experience but he also learned from monks, teachers, and literature.

I will end this discussion of Bashō with his most famous haiku:

Breaking the silence  
Of an ancient pond,  
A frog jumped into water –  
A deep resonance. <sup>338</sup>

Closer to the haiku form, Ueda translates,

the old pond—  
a frog jumps in,  
water's sound <sup>339</sup>

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appreciate the things of nature in the way the poet does. They exist practically, like the fish-eating birds; thus they do not tend to meditate philosophically upon the nature and value of their existence and the world around them. This type of reflection is one that farmers and fishermen have little opportunity to engage in. Nevertheless, they convey value to those things that are useful, pleasurable, and even aesthetic. Philosophy isn't needed to appreciate one's being in the world. Bashō values things in this way as well. In fact, it could be argued that he understood that life and the world can be fully appreciated only from the perspective of rustic simplicity rather than material affluence. Yet his valuing goes deeper, is more heartfelt, because it is rooted in his ontological understanding of the world—that all things are like chestnut blossoms in that they bloom briefly and then perish. To extend the analogy further, the chestnut tree is unaware of its blossoms. In that way it illustrates the universe's relationship to all that it produces. One can see why a Creator that also appreciates what it creates would be invented. Without God, humans must accept that responsibility, and it is artists like Bashō who teach the rest of us these most profound forms of sympathetic understanding and appreciation.

(The above poem and the discussion of the “floating world” are found in Ueda's *The Master Haiku Poet: Matsuo Bashō*, 137-138.)

<sup>338</sup> Bashō, Yuasa translation, 32.

The poem has given rise to many interpretations, including that it has no meaning beyond the event it describes. And to me, that aspect of the poem is most significant. Ontologically (having to do with the nature of reality), the frog can represent all of reality, the entire universe. It is simply a happening having no more meaning than that beyond what humans give to it. With the appearance of consciousness the splash of awareness occurs. The pond can be associated with consciousness, which transform a physical event into a subjective event. The splash itself suggests the many vectors of interpretation. The connection between the pond disturbed by the leaping frog and the poet's consciousness is evident. It seems absurd that a leaping frog and the universe could have equal value, yet in fact, the frog as a living organism represents the highest achievement of universe.

Another aspect of the poem that I find relevant to Bashō's conception of humanity's role in the great scheme of things is the juxtaposition of the frog leaping and human awareness. The frog is obviously not aware of itself in the way it is an object of the poet's awareness. When it becomes an object of human awareness multiple meanings, those of understanding and evaluation, are attached to the frog. One might imagine the ripples caused by the frog's disruption of the tranquil pond as representing ripples of subjective meaning triggered by the frog's appearance in human subjectivity. The presence of the poet is implied, just as human subjectivity is implied by the poem itself. It is empty, nothing, until the frog enters into it. What is then suggested by the poem is that humanity provides the interpretative awareness that enables the world to come into view, but is otherwise nothing in-itself, not even awareness.

The pond itself cannot produce a splash. For a splash to occur, something must enter into pond. Of course, the pond makes the splash possible. So in a sense the frog represents the objects that make up reality that remain unrevealed until they enter consciousness. The role of human consciousness is essential if their reality is to be revealed, understood, and appreciated. Yet in itself human consciousness is nothing in itself because to be realized, brought to life so to speak, an object must enter into it. Paradoxically, when this occurs that which was darkness illuminates the object. Suddenly it becomes like a meteor that is ignited and comes into view when it enters earth's atmosphere. But without the world human consciousness would have nothing to latch onto. It would be perhaps potential awareness, unactualized until something entered into it. In itself it would be worthless, a contemplative god contemplating only nothingness. At least a human floating in the void could contemplate himself or herself. That person would become like the frog. But the self-contemplating God, the self-contemplating No-thing, has nothing to contemplate without the world or the ideas it supposedly embodies. Remove the world from God or humanity and what's left is a dreamer without a dream, a frog attempting to leap in a void.

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<sup>339</sup> *Bashō and His Interpreters*, 140.

Apart from their awareness, humans have a frog nature in that they are nothing more than another organism struggling to survive by interacting in the world that is nature. The poem sums up not only the human condition but the world. Bashō is saying that that's all there is but it's enough because it's amazing. One final note, the leap of the frog also sums up its life—a momentary event after which it disappears beneath the surface of being where all things exist temporarily. Beneath the surface is what might be called prime matter, that fundamental soup of tangible energy from which all the forms of being emerge.

### **Bashō and Saint Augustine: Two Worldviews**

Augustine believed that in this world the soul does not discover the truth which it seeks and so it turns inwards and discovers immutable truth which transcends the soul and does not depend on the soul. This leads it to the apprehension of God, the ground of all truth. The soul searches for God as the source of happiness—which results from believing that there is a beneficent God that is in charge of the universe and that bestowed upon the universe and all its inhabitants a unified, absolute *raison d'être*. But most important of all, this God promises life eternal for humanity. This is the desire for absolute existential purpose and permanence. And it's all about humanity. That is what makes JudeoChristianity a monumental expression of the human ego or human hubris. Bashō puts humanity back in its proper place in the scheme of things.

What Bashō says of the Fujiwara family applies to all human beings, that they “passed away like a snatch of empty dream.” The family was at the center of famous intrigues, battles, and samurai warriors. Bashō says, “both the actors and the deeds have long been dead and passed into oblivion. When a country is defeated, there remain only mountains, and rivers, and on a ruined castle in spring only grasses thrive.”<sup>340</sup> The thought of the ephemeral quality of human existence moves Bashō to tears and to write the following poem:

A thicket of summer grass  
Is all that remains  
Of the dreams and ambitions  
Of ancient warriors.<sup>341</sup>

Of course, the prominent people and events are still remembered today by poets and historians, but that world has passed away and into oblivion most of the people who lived in it. People who have lived long enough to experience the death of friends and loved ones understand Bashō's sorrow. Significant here is that these remarkable people continue to exist only in historical memory. There is no reference to their living in the

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<sup>340</sup> Yuasa's translation, 118.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid.

hereafter. Like the frog all things briefly come into being and then are forever lost in the great pond of oblivion. Because of modern science, we know this better than Bashō could have. He might have thought that the earth and mountains, rivers, and creatures would endure forever. We know that not even the earth, nor its sun and companion planets, will escape oblivion but one day in the future will be reduced to that prime matter from which they emerged.



## Appendix F: Revelations

It's easy to think that the word *revelation* refers primarily to religions though the word can be used in other contexts, such as revelations of misbehaving politicians, corporations, or celebrities, which are media favorites. There are various sources and subject matter of revelations. In this book I've examined various texts—religious, secular, poetic, philosophical, and nonreligious spiritual. Three of the most influential religious revelations are the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Quran. All three are based on information that was supposedly communicated by God to chosen individuals such as Moses and Muhammad. Jesus is a special case since is considered to be God's avatar communicating directly to ordinary people rather than via prophets, disciples, or saints.

### Old Testament

The various points of view of the revelations of the Abrahamic scriptures are interesting and greatly influence the believability of the revelations. In the Bible, for example, revelations are often described from the point of view of an omniscient third person. For example, in the Book of Exodus we read, "The Lord said to Moses, 'Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke.'" (34:1) What is being said is by neither God nor Moses. So who is this omniscient narrator? Moses is supposed to be the narrator. Bible scholars, however, have abandoned that assumption, deepening the mystery of the narrative origin of Exodus but lessening its credibility as a revelation from God to Moses. According to most scholars 6th century B.C. is the date of composition. Is the passage then the point of view of a writer who received—a half-dozen centuries after Moses lived—a revelation of what occurred between God and Moses? To me, the implication is that someone is telling a story, most likely based on earlier versions of the same story, modified over the centuries by various "inspired" scribes, yet originally the product of the imagination of some religiously enthralled storyteller.

### New Testament

In the New Testament we are told in the Gospel of Luke we are given a description of the angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she is miraculously pregnant with Jesus. Understandably, Mary is puzzled. Next we are told, "The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come down to you, and God's power will come over you. So your child will be called the holy Son of God.'" (1:35) My question is who was present to witness this event? Not the gospel writer. So who? Of course, it can be argued that Mary told someone else what happened. It's difficult to believe that she

could remember precisely what was said. But even if she told the story herself, then what we have is not a revelation from God but a description of events given by Jesus' mother. Why should Mary be believed? Or more precisely, why should storyteller be believed? And why do Luke and Matthew give different versions of the Annunciation? And why is such an important event absent from the Gospel of Mark?

Even more puzzling is the description of Jesus being tempted by Satan. The Gospel of Matthew, for example, says the following: "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.'" (4:1-3) The question that comes to my mind is who is witnessing this? Why isn't the episode told by Jesus? The same is true for the stories about Jesus' birth.

### **The Bible and God's BIG PLAN**

It is claimed that the Bible is the word of God. I suppose what this means is God guided the very many literary hands (minds) of the men who describe the hundreds of incidents described in the Old and New Testaments. But when I consider the flights of fancy, inconsistencies, contradictions, and countless statements that are just plain false, it becomes unclear how God was the celestial director overseeing the creation of the Bible. The Bible contains descriptions of endless revelatory moments experienced by its large cast of characters. But the central revelation is supposed to God's BIG PLAN for humanity. Yet, I find it odd that this divine global project would be revealed in a piecemeal fashion over a period of about four thousand years. The actual composition of the Bible supposedly begins with Moses who supposedly lived sometime during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, B.C. Supposedly, God dictated to Moses the first five books (Torah) of the Bible. The information given in those books is a very large, complex, and multifarious revelation for one mind to manage. As special as he was, it's difficult to imagine how Moses could have accomplished such a feat.

This would mean, for example, that God told Moses about Adam and Eve's sinful behavior in the Garden of Eden. Here is an excerpt from that revelation: "And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden." (Genesis 3:8) I find it so odd that God would feel/believe it necessary to reveal this detail to Moses. The story suggests, for one thing, that God is bullying the human neophytes. And his description of himself walking anthropomorphizes him. He appears very Zeus-like stomping about in the garden. Telling the Adam and Eve story and the many others that occur in the Torah is to me unbecoming of God, creator of the Universe.

And how was all this information conveyed to Moses? Was it downloaded in an instant into Moses' brain or over a period of time, in a manner similar to the way

Allah lectures Muhammad via the archangel Gabriel?<sup>365</sup> As far as I can tell, Moses was a very busy man living under difficult circumstances, though he did live to be 120 years old. Did God give all of the Torah at one time, on Mount Sinai, and did Moses write it down on Mt. Sinai? Supposedly, Moses was there for 40 days and night, which is a lot of time, yet he didn't eat or drink water during the whole time. And did he write the five books of the Torah on stone tablets like those the Ten Commandments were written on? If Moses wrote it down later, how did he keep so much information straight in his memory? Another big question is why even bother telling Moses what occurred twenty-four centuries earlier. If God has this BIG PLAN for humanity, why didn't he simply implement it? And another fifteen or so centuries would pass before God decided to visit Earth in the form of an avatar, Jesus, so he could reveal his BIG PLAN to humanity directly, though to a very, very small and insignificant portion of humanity. And today, two-thousand years later, we are still waiting for the BIG PLAN to be implemented.

What all this tells me is that the numerous revelations to be found in the Bible came from the imaginations of religiously inspired storytellers who believed that what they imagined was true. It has been a process of the divines, prophets, rabbis, priests, theologians, saints, clergy, etc., chasing the creations of their own imaginations and then sorting them out into a coherent historical drama. That the BIG PLAN has come to naught after so many thousands of years has brought about another revelation, but not among true believers. One literary expression of that revelation is *The Sun Also Rises*. But before discussing Hemingway's modern, post-Narrative revelation, a word about the Quran.

## **Quran**

The rhetorical structure of the revelation presented in the Quran is very different from the various forms that make up the Bible. The Quran consists solely of what God or Allah reveals to Muhammad, the prophet who relates his revelation to the world via the Quran. This information is verbally delivered by Allah's messenger angel Gabriel.\* Whereas the scriptures of Judaism and JudeoChristianity present a rather Kafkaesque mazelike rhetorical path, via endless raconteurs, to God's BIG PLAN, the Quran simply opens the door to God allowing "him" to speak for "himself" via his messenger Gabriel. Using angels as God's messengers is commonplace in the Bible, but in the Quran the relationship between God and his messenger is apparently unique because it is similar to the way a ventriloquist speaks through a puppet, in that Gabriel delivers the messages verbatim.

\*Interestingly, disbelievers often demand of Yahweh/Allah's prophets "Why has no angel been sent down to help him [a prophet] with his warnings?" (25:7) The question that

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<sup>365</sup> The Quran has Gabriel using the first-person plural pronoun "we." Thus, I assume the pronoun refers to Gabriel and Allah, which has the advantage of making it appear that the reader is "listening" to God speaking rather than Gabriel. I say more about this below.

arises is why Allah doesn't send angelic messengers to deliver his warnings rather than relying on human prophets who, for good reason, are often thought to "be under a spell" (25:8) or "a learned sorcerer." (26:34) It seems a reasonable question since God has an abundance of angels whom he uses to communicate to prophets or other select individuals. And receiving God's message directly from an angel, as Muhammad did, would be much more convincing.

The Abrahamic religions offer God's communications in various ways, as a Zeus like god walking about in the Garden of Eden, through angels, natural phenomena such as a burning bush, a pillar of cloud, a storm, and as a human in the New Testament. The problem is how to conceive the inconceivable, a Universe-creating, world-controlling divine No-thing, since God is not a thing. However, though God cannot be visualized as an entity, *his* character comes across very clearly in what he says and does. As in the Old Testament, the JudeoIslamic God is very much a masculine figure, an authoritarian tribal chief who considers humanity his tribe, consisting of good and evil members—loyal true believers and disloyal disbelievers (doubters, backsliders, heretics).

The advantage of the Quran's mode of revelation is that it provides a consistent, clear portrait of its deity. This consistent clarity makes it easy to decide whether or not Allah is the God a person would want to surrender his or her life to. Unlike in the New Testament, God is not presented in an ambiguous fashion. Jesus is very much a Janus-faced character. On the one hand, Jesus is a loving, divinely inspired person who welcomes all of humanity to follow him; on the other hand, he is a fanatically conservative disciplinarian who will harshly punish those who choose not to follow him. In the Quran the same duality is present, but not in the person of God but in what "he" offers believers and disbelievers in the afterlife: an eternity in a paradisiacal garden or in a fiery torture chamber called Hell, descriptions of which occur on almost every other page.

That God—Yahweh, Jesus, or Allah—would inflict horrific punishment upon humans (for whatever reason) is a moral issue. Hellish punishment of disbelievers is the dominant, recurring theme of Allah's communication to his prophet Muhammad. That Allah would reward his followers is not necessarily morally wrong, but the cruel punishment that he inflicts upon non-followers is egregiously morally wrong. Why not simply deny eternal life to non-followers? That seems punishment enough, though it's not clear that disbelievers should be punished at all. The Quran's unambiguous presentation of God's hatred (extreme aversion, hostility, or detestation) of disbelievers\* does ensure that many readers will conclude that the Quran's portrait God is incompatible with the view that God logically must be a morally perfect being. As Ludwig Feuerbach says in his *This Essence of Christianity*, "The idea of God is dependent on the idea of justice, of benevolence; a God who is not benevolent, not just, not wise, is no God" (21, translated by George Eliot).

\*Often the disbeliever is simply a misbeliever, a person who misunderstands the new theology, yet he or she will be punished as severely as the diehard atheist.

This conclusion assumes that what is moral is not based on whatever God decides is moral. In truth, only morality decides what is moral. Might does not make right especially since might is often used immorally. It can be used either way, morally or immorally, which suggests that something other than might decides which uses are good and which are not. Thus, I find Allah's heavy-handedness falls short of my expectations of divineness. The Quran is to be credited for its honesty. It says, here is the JudeoIslamic version of god, like it or not. The New Testament, on the other hand, offers via Jesus a sugarcoated version of the Jewish God. Thus, it can be argued that the Gospel writers especially (certainly not the author of the Book of Revelation) are guilty of deceiving their readers of the true nature of the god Jesus represents.

Essentially, the Quran is a stern warning to disbelievers: such as those who think stories of people being resurrected from "dust and bones" are just "ancient fables" (23:82-83); or polytheists, who believe in Allah but also in other gods (those who "pray to another god alongside Him" (23:117) or assign him partners (17:111, 5:72); or those who claim Allah has offspring (19:88)\*; or those who continue to worship the gods of their ancestors. (7:70-71) The Quran's warning to these disbelievers is that they "will cast face downwards into the fire" of Hell (27:90) unless they surrender their lives totally to Allah.

\*"How terrible is this thing you assert: it almost causes the heavens to be torn apart, the earth to split asunder, mountains to crumble to pieces, that they attribute offspring to the Lord of Mercy." (19:88-91) A doubly blasphemous version of this heresy is assigning "daughters to God" (16:57) because when an Arab man was "given news of the birth of a baby girl, his face darkens and his filled with gloom. In his shame he hides himself away from his people because of the bad news he has been given." (16:58-59)

That the JudeoIslamic God doesn't simply threaten disbelievers with annihilation but with terrifying everlasting torment is what makes Allah an impossible representative of what I imagine God would be like if he/it existed. An example:

But as for those who disbelieve, garments of fire will be cut out for them; boiling fluid will be poured down on their heads; Whereby that which is in their bellies, and their skins too, will be melted; And for them are hooked rods of iron. (22:19-20)

You have to look pretty hard at Greek mythology to find a god as cruel to humans as Allah is. And there are no Greek gods that demand human beings totally surrender their lives to them. The freedom-loving ancient Greeks would have found such

subservience demeaning. The idea is even demeaning to God, as if a god would treat humans as pets, demanding obedience of them in the way human demand their pets to be obedient. The difference is that most humans treat their pets (even when they disobey) far better than the Abrahamic God has treated humanity. Of course, such a religion is really not about God but about its creators, an expression of human narcissism, humans believing they are so important that the creator of the Universe would become obsessed with being adored by them, even more vain the absurd idea that the Universe was created to serve as the stage for the human-divine drama.

## ὕβρις

The notion of hubris, overweening pride, originated with the ancient Greeks. It was not considered a sin but a character flaw that was shameful and among humans could bring disaster. Its presence meant an absence of virtue. Agamemnon was certainly guilty of hubris when he decided to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia because by doing so he placed himself above morality. Satan is considered the archetypal illustration of hubris because he places himself equal to or above God. In the Quran Iblis is guilty of hubris because he won't follow Allah's command to bow down to humans. Whether his refusal was an act of hubris or simply a refusal to humiliate himself before a lower species is an open question. Personally, I don't think any human should be required to bow down before another human. It suggests Hegel's master-slave relationship. Other than Iblis, I really don't find many people in the Quran who are guilty of hubris. Those who refuse to worship Allah or hold mistaken beliefs about Allah seem to be guilty more of skepticism, confusion, or ignorance.

Allah, on the other hand, exhibits a good deal of hubristic thinking and behavior. Of course, true believers argue that Allah is God so humans should surrender their lives to him regardless. There are two problems with this. First, it's one thing to surrender one's life to God and another to surrender one's life to an idea. Many of the characters in the Quran are skeptical because God never pays them a visit, only his proselytizing messengers do so, such as Muhammad, who appeals to them to surrender their lives to the *idea* of God expressed in the text of the Quran. Second, people are not morally required to surrender themselves to an authority, religious or political, that they believe is an immoral abomination. It's interesting that Allah uses the same method to intimidate (to make timid) people into submission that dictators use—fear of punishment.

## Critical Thinking as a Sin

Allah tells Muhammad to say the following to the people:

“People, I am sent only to give you clear *warning*.” Those who believe and do good deeds will be forgiven and have generous reward, but those who strive to

*oppose Our messages* and try in vain to defeat Us are destined for the *Blaze*.  
(22:49-50)

The Quran is essentially a warning to the people of the world that Allah demands that all people must surrender their lives to him. The word *Islam* (Arabic: *aslama*) means to surrender. Those who do will be rewarded in the afterlife; those who don't will be sent into the fires of Hell. "Oppose Our message" means to reject or disagree with the message. In the Quran there are no examples of disbelievers opposing the Islamic religion in the way Islam opposes other religions—aggressively with condemnations and threats of "The Fire that God has promised the disbelievers!" (22:72) What is described are people who do not wish to give up their traditional faiths or people who want more convincing proof. The Quran even refers to "disbelievers" remaining in "doubt about it [the Lord's Truth] until the Hour suddenly overpowers them or until torment descends on them on the Day devoid of all hope." (22:55) In a sense, one could argue that Satan represents critical thinking, which the Abrahamic religions loathe. In essence, the purpose of the Quran is to discourage critical thinking.

What we see in Allah is divine hubris, which apparently is associated with all deities. The assumption is that gods are logically entitled to be excessively prideful. I disagree. God/gods should be judged by the same standards humans are. In the Quran Allah repeatedly refers to "the many generations We destroyed" (20:128) and "the communities We destroyed." (21:6) These people were destroyed for not accepting or believing in Allah. To me, that is excessive pride in the extreme, a form of narcissism that would be considered pathological in humans.

The Quran allows God (Allah) to speak at length and without interruption to his audience, even though what he says is being conveyed by the messenger Muhammad. In a sense, Muhammad alone is Allah's audience because only he himself is privy to what God tells him via the angel Gabriel. This is a privilege that Muhammad's audience is denied. Neither Allah nor Gabriel speaks to them, only Muhammad does. The drop in credibility should be obvious.

Another disadvantage to the God-centered rhetoric of the Quran is that it clearly reveals Allah's personality. I find very little to like about Allah. Both the Old and the New Testaments contain endless adulatory descriptions of Yahweh and Jesus that provide some balance to their negative descriptions. What comes across unrelentingly in the Quran is Allah as a self-centered, mean-spirited, and vindictively cruel and unforgiving toward people who doubt Muhammad's revelations.

For this reason, I find it impossible to accept as accurate the Quran's revelations of God, which I believe are inconsistent with the moral, psychological, behavioral qualities one would logically associate with a perfect being. Pertinent here is the fact that anyone—even atheists—can have logically and morally justified expectations concerning the nature of God. The views of an atheists concerning

God's nature are no less valid than the views of prophets, priests, scribes, and other true believers because all views of what God is or is not are opinions—neither logical or empirical facts.

### ***The Sun Also Rises***

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century occurred a great blossoming of revelations—contra the Grand Narratives of the Abrahamic faiths—in fiction, philosophy, theology, and science. To name just a few of the most prominent prophets of the age: Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, David Strauss, and Ludwig Feuerbach, Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, Herman Melville, Stephen Crane, Ivan Turgenev, Matthew Arnold, and Alfred Tennyson. Of course, the soil had been cultivated by the great thinkers of the Enlightenment, men such as Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant. God was not the source of these revelations—empirical-logical reason was.

I'm claiming that *The Sun Also Rises* is a revelatory work. The prophet that produced it is Ernest Hemingway, and the inspiration of the revelation was neither divine communication nor divine signs but a historical event, World War I. Did Hemingway think of himself as a prophet? In some sense he must have. His stories are not merely entertainment. The Great War resulted in a seismic shift in the European worldview. Hemingway was one of the writers who had the ability to express the radical change in attitude and its implications for a different way of viewing and appreciating the world, one that goes beyond the mythic narratives of the Abrahamic religions. I doubt that Hemingway was aware that he was announcing a neopaganism that was the next stage after of Romanticism's failed attempt to perpetuate supernaturalism by making nature God's dwelling place, a form of pantheism. The only role the divine plays in neopaganism of *The Sun Also Rises* is its absence.

It is significant that in the novel there is no glorious announcement of the return of mundane world as the only sources of reality, value, and meaning. A common announcement of the Abrahamic religions is that there is no God but Yahweh, Christ, or Allah. But what is always present in the Old Testament and the Quran is nature. One can doubt God but one cannot doubt nature. Even more revealing is that the Abrahamic God has nothing to offer in this world other than the benefits offered by nature with which he is causally associated. The Quranic heaven is a natural setting, gardens graced with flowing streams. And the kingdom God promises his chosen people will be populated with nature's creatures, domesticated:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,  
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,  
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together;  
and a little child shall lead them.



The cow and the bear shall graze;  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. (Isaiah 11:6-7)

Recently Pope Francis said that “One day, we will see our animals again in the eternity of Christ. Paradise is open to all of God’s creatures.” And consistent with the Abrahamic religions, saying so makes it so.

### **What Is God’s Contribution to the World?**

However, the important question raised here is this: Truly, what has been God’s contribution to human existence when the elements of the mundane world, nature and humanity, are excluded? The answer is that there is no reason to assume God had anything with nature’s endless contributions to human existence. And there is no justification for assuming that rational or moral thinking are gifts from God when clearly they are the products of the human intellect. Cambridge University Press says, “Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* is the first and arguably most important treatise on ethics in Western philosophy.” Aristotle wrote the *Ethics* about 350 years before Jesus lived and about 1000 years before the Quran was written. It was a product of Reason, not divine revelation.

What I’m looking for is God’s unique contributions to human existence. And all I can find is *the promise* of either living in a future bucolic utopia here on earth or living eternally in a state heavenly or paradisiacal bliss. The Book of Revelation says that Heaven will be a place where, “There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.” (21:4) The author says also that there will be a “new heaven and a new earth” but to be honest I don’t know what that means, especially when the author also says there will be no night or sun because the Lord God will provide light. (22:5) It appears that in his revealed version of Heaven human existence is reduced to basking forever in God’s spiritual light.

### **God = God ≠ God Exists**

Let’s return to the notion that there is no God but God, which sounds like a tautology that can be said of any unique thing fictional or real. There is no number 1 but number 1. There is no Geronimo but Geronimo. However, the big difference between my examples and God is that there is universal agreement on the nature and existence of the number 1 and Geronimo. About God there is agreement on neither, only an endless number of conflicting opinions. I do (reluctantly) assume that the statement is logically true if it means that there can be only one God—supreme being—because logically two supreme beings would mean that neither one would be supreme. It’s like saying there are no unicorns other than those with a single horn in the center of their forehead. The statement is true analytically in that the definition of unicorns requires a single horn in the forehead—though not all such animals are

unicorns. Being supreme is logically required of God just as the single horn in the forehead is logically required for unicorns. However, the claim “there is no God but God” is not necessarily existentially true just as no definitional claims about unicorns logically implies they exist.

Jake Barnes has concluded—whether he admits it or not—that only the first part of the statement about God is true: THERE IS NO GOD, which changes the existential situation for Jake and his disbelieving friends. This is part of *The Sun Also Rises*’ revelation. The other part is exploring ways of living meaningfully in the mundane world without God. And, as it turns out and as the story reveals, there are very many profound sources of meaning available to nonbelievers—including the esteem of courageously facing life without God and accepting that God is the product wishful thinking. Jake does try to avoid the truth that God does not exist by behaving like an ostrich and sticking his head in the sand, that is, by going to church. But it doesn’t work. He has seen too much horror to continue to believe in God, at least the Abrahamic God supposedly devoted to humanity’s welfare.

And I will add that it doesn’t matter whether God exists or not. The Great War and all the other ceaseless horrors humanity has had to endure means God’s existence is irrelevant to humanity’s existence, though the various ideas people hold about God have been (detrimentally) influential. What good is a God that inspires fear and loathing and does nothing to improve the human condition? All improvement has come from human effort and ingenuity with the help of nature’s largess.

Hemingway was not an intellectual storyteller like George Eliot. His revelation was not inspired by the revelations of bookish critical-thinking intellectuals who came before him or lived during his time. Yet, the young Hemingway was very much, in his own way, a critical thinker. It’s just that what spoke to him most was his experience of the people and events of the empirical world. The biggest influence was the Great War. With the Great War abstract belief systems collapsed. The individual was thrown back upon himself or herself to pick through the rubble of discarded ideas to build a personally constructed worldview and value system. In *The Sun Also Rises* the reader sees Jake Barnes doing just that. But most of all what the reader sees is a character seeking to live as meaningfully as possible in this world. Jake, like Hemingway, saw enough death—bodies blown to pieces—to know that death, not God, is the final arbiter of a person’s life.

### **Basho’s Revelation**

Basho’s poetry and especially his *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* are a revelation. Basho perceived and understood the world from a perspective that is very different from the two dominant perspectives that have determined Western Civilization’s perception and understanding of world. Judaism degraded the world as a fallen setting of sinful behavior yet, paradoxically, a material showplace that reveals and glorifies God. From the perspective of Judaism and its religious offspring, the

mundane world possesses no inherent value. To the contrary, it is often depicted as a place where various forms of evil flourish.

### **The Judaistic Perspective and God's BIG PLAN**

Judaism also gave the West the idea that the Universe has some BIG PLAN that is being realized through history. Basically, it involves a war that Yahweh (Christ and Allah) declared against polytheists, idol worshipers, members of non-Abrahamic faiths or the wrong Abrahamic faith, heretics within the faith, and disbelieving atheists—all of whom are advised and supported by Satan and his horde of demonic followers. The goal of the war is to eradicate the mundane world of disbelievers and apostates and in the afterlife intern them eternally in the fires of Hell. Those who surrendered their lives to the Abrahamic god will be rewarded with eternal life in paradise.

### **Religious Stress Disorders**

Psychologically, the mental state caused by the Abrahamic religions is the opposite of that resulting from the religions represented in Basho's poetry and travelogues, Zen Buddhism and Taoism. In my opinion, the Abrahamic religions induced an obsessive-compulsive religious mindset, characterized by anxiety, intrusive thoughts that produce uneasiness, apprehension, fear or worry, and repetitive behaviors aimed at reducing the associated anxiety. Fear and chronic anxiety would be caused by institutional censure, rejection by other true believers, fear of sin, fear of the Devil, and fear of going to Hell in the afterlife. Repeated anxiety-reducing behaviors would be daily readings of scripture, praying throughout the day, and attending regular religious services. The goal of the Abrahamic religions is to take captive the mind of the believer, resulting in the true believer being imprisoned in a religious house of mirrors. Everywhere the believer looks God is lurking and watching. As the Quran says, "Your Lord is never unmindful of what you all do." (27:93) An aspect of the totalitarian nature of the Abrahamic religions is God's role as a divine Big Brother, constantly watching his subjects, not as a shepherd but as a mistrustful slave master.

### **Decline of religious anthropomorphism in the West**

The BIG PLAN of the Abrahamic religions is the one initially given by God. However, once belief in an anthropomorphic God waned, some other BIG PLAN mechanism was searched for, such as those invented by German Idealists, the best known being Hegel's notion that a rational Absolute had a BIG PLAN in Mind for human history, realized through Hegel's philosophical system. It was hard giving up the BIG PLAN ideal of the Jews because it transformed reality into a story all about humanity. Before they were infected by the Hebrew myth, the ancient Greeks and Romans were too rational to accept such a notion, though their philosophies would be

corrupted by Eastern spiritualism, in particular the belief in the migration of souls from this world to their spiritual homeworld or the Stoic's notion of the Universe being a cosmic organism having a rational soul (*Logos*).

### **The Rational Perspective the Ancient Greeks**

The other perspective is that of the ancient Greek scientists—thinkers such as Thales, Anaxagoras, Archimedes, Euclid, Democritus, Aristotle, Ptolemy, Epicurus, and many others.<sup>366</sup> Their view of reality—the mundane world—is in many ways similar to that of Basho. Both Basho and the ancient Greek scientists allow the earth to speak to them. It is their source of revelation. These early scientists were most interested in the workings of the mundane world, and their approach relied more on empirical and logical reason rather than superstition. Basho's understanding was fundamentally intuitive. Yet, though the attitude of the Greek scientists was one of appreciative understanding, it was also objective and impersonal. The subject and object are not one. On the other hand, Basho's attitude toward the things of this world is essentially aesthetic, sympathetic, and personal. He became one with the people, creatures, and things he observed.

### **Basho—Living in the Worldly Present**

Whereas the Abrahamic religions obsessively focus on the past and future, Basho focuses on the present moment. For Basho, human life is a series of present moments captured in immediate awareness. In addition, the Abrahamic religions create a mythic matrix that isolates believers from the reality of the mundane world by distorting their understanding, thus perception and appreciation of the mundane reality. Basho relates to the world directly rather than through the interpretative medium of religious myth. For Basho a rose is a rose is a rose, not a sign of God's goodness, sin, or Christ as the new Adam.

The Abrahamic religions seek to harvest a person's soul for God, thus co-opting the process of self-realization. The benefit to the egocentric is becoming a subject of God's personal concern and the *raison d'être* of the cosmos' creation. Both are huge ego boosters. The place of the individual in Basho's worldview is cosmically significant but less flattering and inflating to the ego. But Basho was not driven by ego concerns but by love for the mundane world and its creatures. He sought a role to play, but it was essentially of altruistic appreciation rather than egotistical self-aggrandizement. The mundane world would exist to serve him but he would exist to serve it as an appreciative observer.

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<sup>366</sup> See the following online: Index of Ancient Greek Scientists – ICS.

### **Basho's Invitation**

What characterizes Basho's method of appreciation is its naturalness. Basho allows experience of the world to flow into the self, naturally, without the distortions caused by political, economic, religious, ideological, or even scientific ideas. A peach is not commodity, not a gift from God; nor can it be reduced to its material-mechanical operation described by science, as interesting as they might be. A peach is not even its name. It is a fragile, mysterious, beautiful entity that just happens to give pleasure to those capable of experiencing it during their own fragile moment of existence. In their fragility and finitude all things are related; all things are equal.

Basho invited the world into himself, and that internalized world became the soil from which Basho self-blossomed artistically. Basho's writings and paintings are only glimmerings of Basho's self or soul that cannot be revealed directly. But what we do know is that Basho's self, as with any artist, is a mixing bowl that infuses the perceived object with human subjectivity. In Basho's case, the nature of that subjectivity is suggested in his words and paintings. This approach to revealing the world is individualistic thus heterogeneous and multifarious. The meanings of the world become like white light scattered into a spectrum of colors. Basho's subjective response to the world is one unique color of appreciative understanding. His approach is one that encourages, rather than discourages, individual understanding. Through his life he tells us that each person can travel his or her own path through life and by doing so allow the world to reveal itself uniquely to that person.

### **Traveling One's Own Path**

Basho's approach to understanding the world is contrary to that of the Abrahamic religions, whose purpose is to spread a spiritual monoculture, a single vision and experience of the world. They impose upon the mind a filter that enables only one revelation, one experience of the world, one that is also unfaithful to reality, to nature, to the earth and its creatures. Seeing the world through them is truly seeing it through a glass darkened by a depraved myth that transforms the world into dark, depressing drama filled with all sorts of nefarious characters, the most nefarious of all being not Satan but the world's diabolical puppet master—God. Putting aside the Bible or Quran to enter into Basho's world is like leaving a dungeon and entering the world at sunrise to begin a journey that is one's own.

For Basho the divine is unnecessary because life is fulfilled in the living of it each day. There is nothing more. Nothing more is needed. Life is in-itself miraculous. The Quran says, "Everything in the heavens and earth glorifies God." (59:1) Untrue, everything in the heavens and earth glorify the heavens and earth. Basho places emphasis on the immediacy of the present moment. There is nothing else. The past is past; the future is an illusion of expectation. The afterlife is an illusion of the ego's craving for eternity. As much as he is adored, God lacks even the reality of a

peach—an existing entity that can be observed and gratefully eaten. There is no God other than thinking there is. God is an intangible, imagined idea full of “sound and fury” signifying nothing. A peach is there whether I will it or not. It is there in stubborn, gracious suchness. It is not a waft of ghostly smoke given off by the imagination.

### **Nature’s Wisdom**

We can learn more from plants and animals than from God because God doesn’t live. “He” exists only in the way ideas exist, as non-living abstractions. And what we can learn from nature’s creatures is part of what is to be found in Basho’s revelations.<sup>367</sup> One of the key lessons learned from nature’s creatures is, with certain exceptions, living simply: their impact or disturbance upon their environment and other creatures is slight. And often, they not only live their lives but enhance and provide for the lives of others. Plants and animals can be enjoyed for their beauty, but they also provide sustenance for other creatures. Basho’s home, clothes, food and drink all came from nature.

### **Theologies of Suffering**

Letting go of the ego—one’s own and God’s—to invite the world into one’s appreciative awareness without distortion, without a lot of mythical clutter. Returning to the source of all things is a return not to God but to the evanescent reality of the mundane world that is clearly illustrated in Chinese landscape painting. The Abrahamic religions expect one to surrender to God, that ghostly No-thing whose involvement in the mundane world is usually destructive forms of punishment inflicted upon pagans, heathens, polytheists, disbelievers, sceptics, dissenters, apostates, heretics, scoffers, and satirists.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> No people learned as profoundly from nature as did Native Americans (Indians). Their way of living in the mundane world is their revelation to humanity. Their lives and worldview can be found in many terrific books. I remember a time when bookstores devoted entire sections to them. Today those bookstores have disappeared but the books can be found with a little effort. Yet, one cannot hope to begin to understand their way of life and way of thinking without visiting the natural landscapes in America where their lives were interwoven with nature’s geographical monuments and their natural inhabitants.

<sup>368</sup> It’s necessary to include the last two since on January 7, 2015, Allah, via his assassins, struck the Paris office of *Charlie Hebdo*, a well-known French satirical magazine, and murdered twelve people. Allah is responsible according to the Quran, which says that whatever Allah’s followers do to Allah’s enemies is “done by God’s leave, so that He might disgrace those who defy him.” (59:5) The reference in this case is to Jews who broke faith with the Muhammad. Lines 59:2-3 describe the consequences: “He [Almighty, the Wise Allah] it is Who hath caused those of the People of the [Biblical] Scripture who disbelieved to go forth from their homes unto the first exile... In the Hereafter they will have the torment of the fire.” The central theme of the Quran is absolute intolerance toward any expression of

opinions or beliefs that are contrary to those of the Quran. Allah often tells Muhammad to ignore or leave the disbelievers. Allah (God), however, often destroys tormentors and will torture them all in the afterlife.

Yet, we know that the Quran was conceived by Muhammad who serves as Allah ventriloquist. How do we know that? Because the Quran is replete with references to Muhammad's personal life. Whenever he encounters a frustration it ends up being addressed in the Quran. The biggest frustration, of course, was his intolerant religion being rejected. As a result, the Quran is saturated with threats of burning in Hell directed toward unbelievers. Another example would be Muhammad's marriage to his cousin Zaynab bint Jahsh. However, before that occurred he had already forced her "against her will" (Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* 156) to marry his adopted son, Zayd ibn Harithah, who had been given to Muhammad as a wedding gift by a former wife, Khadijah, when they were married. Zaynab was not happy about the idea of marrying a former slave (eventually freed by Muhammad) but married Zayd nevertheless, apparently after Muhammad revealed to her one of his revelations:

It is not for any believer, man or woman, when Allah and His Messenger have decided a matter, to have liberty of choice in their decision. Whoever disobeys Allah and His Messenger has gone far astray. (33:36)

She can't very well refuse when refusing Muhammad entails refusing God.

Yet the saga continues. Watt tells us that about two years after Zaynab and Zayd were married Muhammad went to the house of Zayd, who was absent, and "saw Zaynab scantily clad" (156) and exclaimed "Praise be to God, praise to the Manager of Hearts." Zaynab told Zayd what had occurred and he went to Muhammad and told him he would divorce Zaynab so Muhammad could have her. Muhammad told Zayd to keep her. But apparently Zaynab no longer wanted to remain with the ex-slave when she knew Allah's messenger had been smitten by her. So the marriage ended in divorce anyway and after the appropriate waiting period Muhammad and Zaynab married. The episode created some gossip critical of Muhammad's marrying his adopted son's wife. Muhammad addressed the criticism in another revelation:

When you [Muhammad] said to him [Zayd] whom Allah had blessed, and you had favored, "Keep your wife to yourself, and fear Allah." But you hid within yourself what Allah was to reveal [Muhammad's desire for Zaynab]. And you feared the people, but it was Allah you were supposed to fear. Then, when Zayd ended his relationship with her, We gave her to you in marriage, that there may be no restriction for believers regarding the wives of their adopted sons, when their relationship has ended. The command of Allah was fulfilled. There is no blame on the Prophet regarding what Allah has ordained for him. (33:37-38)

The solution was for Allah/Muhammad to eliminate the taboo against marrying the wives of sons if the sons were adopted. Clearly, the sura was self-serving and invented by Muhammad to justify his behavior. Much of the Quran is used to justify or rationalize Muhammad's

actions by having Allah condone them. This magic trick did not originate with Muhammad. The ancient Jews did exactly the same thing in order to divinely justify their theft of Canaan and would do it again in 1948. And really these are microscopic examples of religion being a product of the human imagination and human desire.\*

\* The Abrahamic religions are a complex idea that has a cornucopia of imaginary, self-serving uses such as inflating the ego, denying one's finitude, and morally edifying immoral actions. The creation of the Quran proves a close-up view of how the particulars of the idea emerge and then are preserved as scripture. Since the supernatural characters (numbering in the millions) are never present, the religion must rely on churches, mosques, works of art, and scripture its endless commentaries to concretize the idea—to make it appear real and not just imaginary.

Returning to Muhammad, what the Quran vividly reveals is his violent intolerance of those who rejected his new religion. He took any criticism personally but was especially intolerant of criticism that came from non-Muslims. At the time, poets played the role of social commentators, in the way news commentators and political cartoonists do today. Muhammad enjoyed praise coming from poets but could not tolerate criticism, which isn't a trait one expects in a spiritual leader who claims to be communicating with God. Of course, Allah is absolutely intolerant of dissenters but Allah is a projection of Muhammad. Watt provides a few examples of Muhammad's intolerance. (1) Muhammad "had two prisoners executed. One had written verses about him, and the other had said that his own stories about things Persian were as good as the tales of the Quran. Throughout his career Muhammad was specially sensitive to intellectual or literary attacks of this kind. They were for him an unforgivable sin." (123)

(2) A man and a woman had written poems against Muhammad. The verses were critical of the people of Medina for allowing Muhammad, an outsider, to control their affairs, "a man who confused right and wrong... and who aimed at being a king." The killings apparently were not ordered but done on Muhammad's behalf by his followers. Watt tells us that "he did not express any disapproval." Out of fear, the next of kin of the poets did nothing and a number even converted to Islam. (127-128)

(3) Ka'b ibn-al-Ashraf, the Medinan Jew, in his poems encouraged the expression of grief [for those killed in the Battle of Badr] in order subsequently to stir up the desire for revenge." (133) He was assassinated by Muslims on the order of the prophet Muhammad.

(4) Watt tells of the Muslim tribe Khuzaaah that declared themselves allies of Muhammad and killed a man of another "tribe who had written verses hostile to Muhammad." (201) What is here most significantly illustrated is that Muhammad doesn't have to order the assassinations of critics: he inspires such assassinations fourteen centuries after his death.

(5) Watt explains that Muhammad's extermination or ethnic cleansing of the Jews had two motivations: they were wealthy and he desired their wealth and their criticism of Muhammad version of their religion threatened "to undermine the foundation of the whole Islamic community." (175) They were allowed to live unmolested if they kept quiet and paid the 50% *dhimmi* tax.

Finally, (6) there is the story of Abd-Allah ibn-Ubayy who complained about Muhammad, saying that he came to Medina to keep the peace but only involved the people in brawls, that he had given property belonging to Medinans to strangers, Muhammad's



Totally contrary to Buddhism's and Taoism's attempts to minimize suffering by avoiding forms of thinking and behaving that cause suffering, the Abrahamic religions introduced ways of thinking and behaving that increased suffering in the world, in part by encouraging conflict. The Jews invented a god that hates and seeks to punish most of humanity. The Bible begins with God condemning and punishing humanity. JudeoChristianity and JudeoIslam declared a holy crusade or jihad upon humanity. The Abrahamic religions are essentially a breeding ground for conflict. The extent of the conflicts is almost incomprehensible given the religions are at war against not only endless groups of pagans, disbelievers, infidels, and heathens but also against people they consider heretics or apostates within their own faiths. What the ancient Jews invented was a religious cluster bomb that has been exploding for millennia and continues today.

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followers from Mecca, and that Muhammad and his followers were going to lord it over the citizens of Mecca. (Watt 162) In response to Ibn Ubayy's complaints, his son, Abd-Allah, offered to kill his father for Muhammad. Muhammad rejected the offer, most likely because Ibn-Ubayy might have been a complainer but he was a high-ranking Muslim. The lesson of this story is that Muhammadanism is a religion that inspires patricide and even fratricide in another context.

Ibn Ishaq tells of Muhammad saying "Kill any Jew that falls into your power. The Muslims Muhayyisa responded by killing Ibn Sunayna, a Jewish merchant. Muhayyisa's brother criticized the killing, and Muhayyisa responded by telling him that had Muhammad order him to kill his brother he would cut off his head. (369) One of the complaints against Muhammad was that he "has brought a message by which he separates a man from his father, from his brother, or from his wife or from his family." (Ibn Ishaq 121)

Of course, Jesus also stated that such division was his purpose:

I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. (Matthew 10:34-37)

Such division is the essence of the Abrahamic religions, illustrated by centuries of bloodshed that continue today.

Returning to Muhammad's hatred of critics and his desire to see them dead, the Quran/Muhammad says, "Those who insult Allah and His Messenger, Allah has cursed them in this life and in the Hereafter, and has prepared for them a demeaning punishment." If "the rumormongers in the City, do not desist, We will incite you against them; then they will not be your neighbors there except for a short while. They are cursed; wherever they are found, they should be captured and killed outright." (33:57, 33:60-61) Thus, the root of the intolerance that slaughter employees of *Charlie Hebdo* is Muhammad and his religion Muhammadanism.

In addition to the suffering caused by conflicts between religious groups, there is the psychological suffering caused by the fear of punishment in the afterlife, the fear of demonic elements such as devils, the fear of sin, and endless forms of self-loathing resulting from believing one has fallen short of God's expectations. Even if a person who has lived the life of a saint cannot be sure that he or she will not be damned since God is far above being influenced by a lowly human being no matter how pious. And the notion of predestination implies that God has already decided who will be saved and who will be damned. The painter Hieronymus Bosch illustrates in works such as *Death of the Reprobate* and *Temptation of St. Anthony* the grotesque and nightmarish mindset and its view of reality that can result when the mind is enthralled by the worldview of any of the Abrahamic religions.

Taoism and Buddhism, on the other hand, combine to offer a worldview that minimizes conflict. They are both critical of ideas that influence how people interpret and relate to the world. Ideas can become sources of distortion or barriers between the observer and the observed. And they would certainly be critical of religious ideologies that claim to "know" the truth and even demand that other people embrace that truth. According to Buddhism, ways of thinking that result in unnecessary suffering are false and to be avoided. Logically, then, Buddhism would have to reject the thinking of the Abrahamic religions if only because of their propensity to cause suffering.

### **It's an odd God that Declares War on the World**

It is quite odd that God would encourage conquest, bloodless or otherwise. *Wikipedia's* article "Religious War" provides a list of major religiously motivated conflicts. All involve the Abrahamic religions. The Buddhist uprising listed was not a rejection of Catholicism but rebellion against Catholic military juntas guilty of "discrimination against the majority Buddhist population." It's noteworthy that Catholicism was introduced into Vietnam by aggressive French missionaries and colonizers. In 1649 the Jesuit missionary Alexandre de Rhodes "pleaded for increased funding for Catholic missions to Vietnam, telling somewhat exaggerated stories about the natural riches to be found in Vietnam" ("Rhodes," *Wikipedia*). In essence, the Jesuits were carrying out a religious war against the Vietnamese Buddhists. Would the United States government have been so zealously supportive of the France's colonialistic oppression of Vietnam if it had not been the case that the oppressed were pagan Buddhists or Marxist atheists and the oppressor Christian? What JudeoChristianity and JudeoIslam cannot do is live side by side with disbelievers because conversion of nonbelievers is an integral part of their religious doctrine.

Totally contrary to the thinking of Buddhism and Taoism is the idea put forth by the Abrahamic religions that God would consider that most humans (gentiles, infidels, and atheists) are deserving of suffering horrifically in the fires of Hell. Just

the idea of Hell has been a cause of endless mental and emotional suffering—thus is incompatible with the Taoist-Buddhist mindset. Whereas Taoism and Buddhism seek to achieve a quiescent state of mind, the Abrahamic religions seek to instill in believers a terrifying fear of God, whose punishments and threats of punishment are the dominant themes in Abrahamic scriptures. Observing the world from the looking glass of the Abrahamic religions one sees a world fraught with sin and devils, humans threaten with damnation and eternal punishment, and a god whose role is that of a green-eyed tyrant and cosmic Big Brother. The Abrahamic religions are mental constructs that distort believers' experience and understanding of the world rather than reveal the world as it actually is. Truly, the world is terrifying enough without adding to it invented mythological terrors. Death awaits all human beings. That's bad enough without inventing the fires of Hell.<sup>369</sup>

### **Life as a Puppet**

Mental constructs can liberate the mind or imprison it. The Abrahamic religions do the later. One needs only to observe Jews praying, chanting and mechanically jerking to and fro before the Western Wall in Jerusalem or consider that Muslims praying to Allah five times a day to realize what it means to be imprisoned in a religious mindset that isolates true believers from the mundane world by focusing their minds upon imagined transcendent realities (God, angels, devils, and the “truer” world of the afterlife in paradise or Hell). From the perspective of Taoism, the Tao—the way of the world—is one with mundane reality, not with a transcendent supernatural reality.

The philosophy of Taoism is simple: understand how the world works and by doing so learn how to live in harmony with it. This view of the world does not assume the world is all harmony and tranquility. To the contrary, it is because the world is a dangerous place that one needs to learn how it works. Raging rivers are dangerous so should be avoided by swimmers. The belief that epilepsy is caused by demons is a misconception that prevents beneficial treatments (anticonvulsant medications rather than exorcism) that are based on the “way” of the disease—a disorder of the nervous system. When one cannot explain a phenomenon, it's best to avoid flights of the imagination (flashes lightning are divine thunderbolts) and rely on careful empirical investigation. That means that in some cases it's better to do nothing rather than act

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<sup>369</sup> The wise ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 B.C.) understood this and sought in Buddha-like (566?–480 B.C.) fashion to combat the religious notion of the afterlife, upon which postmortem punishment or suffering is based. He did this by embracing another wise Greek philosopher's theory of atoms, Democritus (460–370 B.C.). Atomism is also a feature of Buddhist beliefs. So much humane and scientific wisdom offered so early in human history, only to be superseded by the cruelly terrifying and bizarrely irrational superstitions of the Abrahamic religions.

out of ignorance. The fundamental assumption here is that thoughts and actions based on ignorance are more likely to increase suffering rather than lessen it.

### **Nature's *Laissez Faire* versus God's Intrusiveness**

In nature creatures take what they need. Once satisfied they tend to leave other creatures alone. The Abrahamic religions are characterized by the insatiable quest to convert the entire world to accommodate the demands of their deity. This goes beyond the conversion of disbelievers to include converting nature from its wild demonic state by domesticating it. Inflicting one's desires upon others creates adversarial relationships that unavoidably result in suffering producing conflict. The adversarial relationship is exactly what characterizes the Abrahamic religions' relationship to the rest of the world. Certainly, behaviors that cause harm have to be restrained to prevent or reduce suffering, even if doing so causes some (lesser) degree of suffering, such as that resulting from the restraint itself. We don't allow children to play with fire or adults to drive when drunk. The most egregious demand associated JudeoChristianity and JudeoIslam is the condemnation and conversion disbelievers, which, strangely, also includes Christians from the Muslim perspective and vice versa. The great suffering conversion is supposed to avoid is the imagined punishment will occur in the afterlife. In reality, however, the mission to convert nonbelievers is not done to save them but to do God's will.

### **The impermanence of existence**

From a Buddhist-Taoist perspective the mundane world is not sustained by an underlying, unshakable reality such as Plato's forms or the Abrahamic god. In his discussion of the Buddhist's view of the nature of reality John Koller explains that the world/reality is "constituted by combinations of discrete, evanescent elemental forces in constant motion. (*Oriental Philosophies* 179) Certain Chinese landscape paintings represent the world as consisting of gigantic, cloud-like emanations that virtually eclipsed humanity's presence. In reference to the influence of Chinese philosophy on landscape painting, *Wikipedia* says, "Taoism stressed that humans were but tiny specks amongst vast and greater cosmos." ("Chinese Painting")

In *Chinese Art* Mary Tregear says, "Taoist beliefs can be expressed in landscape, and particularly in what mountains evoke: the remote, the eternal, an overpowering sense of scale when they are related to human beings." (107-108) The world appears as an elaborate dreamscape. And though humans make their way in the world, its reality remains essentially mysteriously alien, fundamentally indifferent to humanity's presence. Tregear provides a number of such landscapes. Two are Xu Daoning's *Fishing in a Mountain Stream* and Guo Xi's *Early Spring*.

The themes expressed in these paintings are very different from the worldview presented by the Abrahamic religions. First, nature is God in so far as nature is the creator of the world. Second, once the conventional labels that are

applied to nature for purposes of interpretation and understanding are suspended, nature is revealed as essentially mysterious. Third, humanity is not the *raison d'être* or purpose of the world. Neither nature nor the Universe (which are one) exists for humanity's sake. Humans have no purpose other than what they assign to themselves. Like all creatures humans are brief visitors. Their one unique contribution, however, is illustrated by the two artists—to serve as appreciative observers. Finally, spirituality or divinity does not require an anthropomorphic god such as Yahweh, Christ, or Allah that is aware of its creation and obsessed with the thinking and behavior of the human species. It can be argued that humans provide awareness to nature, but their perspective is theirs alone. Nature/Universe has no perspective.

For the Buddhist-Taoist artist nature's imposing, alien, and primordially mysterious presence seen from afar is in memory when observing close-up individual entities. In a sense, the macrocosm of nature highlights and enhances the microcosm of the mundane world. In the flow of existence, each individual—especially living creatures—appear momentarily and then disappear forever. Their brief existence inspires a heartfelt appreciation in the equally vulnerable and equally finite observer. Since I've already discussed in some detail Basho's revelatory *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, I will mention here three Chinese paintings that I believe express visually Basho's Buddhist-Taoist attitude toward the mundane world and its inhabitants.

### **Artistic Contemplation**

In the paintings already noted the fundamentally mysteriousness of the mundane world inspired a Buddhist-Taoist meditative mindset totally unlike that of the mindset created by the Abrahamic religions. In Shen Zhou's painting *Poet on a Clifftop* the dominant presence is mysterious nature that envelops, almost concealing, human society represented by a group of houses half hidden in a valley. The poet gazes from the clifftop, a small, insignificant figure, yet the subjective portal that enables the world to reveal itself to appreciative contemplation. There is no super-natural presence only the mysterious, creative divinity of nature. The poem that accompanies the painting could very well describe Basho:

White clouds sash-like  
wrap mountain waists,  
The rock terrace flies in space,  
distant, a narrow path.  
Leaning on a bramble staff,  
far and free I gaze,  
To the warble of valley brook  
I reply with the cry of my flute.<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>370</sup> The painting and a different translation of the poem are found Tregear, 157-158.

The scene is tranquil; the human presence nestled unobtrusively in the nature's bosom.

### **Incompatibles: Taoist-Buddhist East/Abrahamic West**

Zhou's painting epitomizes the contrasting attitudes toward nature of the West and East. Whereas the Buddhist-Taoist seeks to live in harmony with nature, the ideal of the West, inspired by Judaism, is confrontational. Unruly nature is to be conquered and subdued (domesticated) just as disbelievers are to be destroyed or converted. The Bible begins with God giving mankind dominion over all of nature:

“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and *subdue it*, and *have dominion over* the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over *every* living thing that moves on the earth.” (Genesis 1:28)

And when the members of the Abrahamic faiths take the time to appreciate nature they don't appreciate it for itself but as a darkened glass through which to “know” its always-absent divine creator. Shen Zhou's painting reminds us that the highest function of humanity's relationship to nature is not conquest or domestication but appreciative awareness.

### **Emperor Huizong and the Taoist Aesthetic**

Basho's revelation is rooted in Chinese Taoism, which was exquisitely expressed six centuries before Basho in Taoist Emperor Huizong's painting *Five-colored Parakeet on a Branch of Apricot Blossom*. The inscription to the painting reveals that Huizong considered the bird one of nature's miracles, as are all of nature's creations. The parakeet is valued for itself, not a sign of God's creativity. To truly appreciate the mundane world one must empty one mind of God, which can only distort and distract one's appreciative understanding of the mundane world and its creations.

Huizong's response to the world is essentially aesthetic. Like other Buddhist-Taoist artists he saw the mundane world as a landscape of beauty. That he found so much beauty in a single creature reveals that beauty is its own self-justifying value—expressed naturally in the bird and artificially by the inspired poet-artist. Unlike God, the parakeet's value is intrinsically present for anyone to observe and appreciate. The intangible, invisible Abrahamic god must derive value from the things he *supposedly* created. The poem by Huizong inscribed on the painting is revealing:

Heaven produced the parakeet, this strange bird,  
From far away he came to the imperial precinct.  
His body is complete with five colors and his nature

rare.  
Blessed is he, uttering many a fine speech, his tone  
most beautiful.  
When flying high, to be envied is he, his feathers elegant.  
When walking about, contented is he, fed with choice  
grain.  
His yellow breast and purple feet are truly perfect,  
Thus I compose a new verse and sing as I stroll. (Trans. Kojiro Tomita.)

Huizong attributes to “heaven” the creation of the bird, not God. Heaven seems to represent the mysterious creative force of nature that lies beyond reach of the human imagination. That short phrase is all that is devoted to the creator of parakeet. The rest of the poem is devoted to the bird. By painting the parakeet and writing a poem in its honor, Huizong achieves an appreciative sympathy unity with the bird that is aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional.

To the Buddhist-Taoist observer the bird’s value resides in its beauty, finitude, and mystery. The beauty of the parakeet is something of a miracle, and the “strange bird” is fundamentally mysterious. The nature of beauty has been discussed in great detail by philosophers and artists, yet it remains notoriously difficult to define. A quality that gives intense pleasure or deep satisfaction to the mind is hardly adequate since it describes the response rather than define what causes the response. Beauty is both enchanting and enthralling thus understandably a threat to a god that demands to be the sole object of humanity’s adoration. It could be argued that beauty and the sublime are attributes that make the mundane world an object of veneration. And it’s not surprising Yahweh/Allah was so jealous of the idols (material objects) that attracted veneration. And it’s not surprising that so many of the pagan gods were associated with natural phenomena.

### **The Kinship of Finitude and Mystery**

The awareness of one’s finitude can result in one resenting the material world and one’s material self and longing for an eternal afterlife. It is this resentment and longing that characterizes the Abrahamic religions.<sup>371</sup> On the other hand, one’s

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<sup>371</sup> There is good reason for thinking Plato felt this way to some degree. And he certainly provided the philosophy and theology that encouraged such a view. However, I doubt many JudeoChristians or JudeoMuslims would be satisfied with Platonic soul’s destination. It seems that for Plato there are two fates for the soul. The first is to be reincarnated into another body, an idea perhaps adopted from Hinduism. The implication is that the new bodily receptacle will have no knowledge of the soul’s former receptacles. The second fate occurs once the soul qualifies for its final release from the material world (no further reincarnations). It will then remain a disembodied mind that will make its way to the eternal forms or truths, which will either absorb the soul or serve as pure ideas to be

finitude can inspire a sympathetic bond with all finite beings. And I believe that is what one finds in the art of both Basho and Huizong. Finitude is the bases for the tragic condition of existence. All things that come into existence will parish.

Accepting gracefully and courageously that fact is one of the lessons offered by the Buddhist-Taoist worldview. And because suffering is an inherent part of life, the two spiritual philosophies teach ways of avoiding causing suffering that is unnecessary. Finally, it is a worldview that especially inspires a sympathetic bond with those things that are most fragile and vulnerable to harm and suffering.

That there should be so much beauty in the world—exquisite, perfect beauty embodied in the most diminutive of creatures such as birds and flowers—and that such entities should exist at all convey a mysteriousness to all of existence. The mystery does not reside in an inability to explain the emergence and workings of nature's creations. Science has provided those explanations. The mystery is existential, that there is something rather than nothing and that so much of that something is so marvelous. The God solution to that mystery is no solution at all—replacing one mystery with another not nearly as enchanting. The God solution of the Abrahamic religions is a specious, anthropomorphic, self-aggrandizing, reassuring feel-good solution that accomplished little good and has caused great harm.

The ontological mystery of Huizong's parakeet is one that is both profound and enjoyable. It is a mystery that both the observer and the observed share in. Their shared existential condition created a loving bond between Huizong and the parakeet. The same bond and celebration of being-in-the-world is found in Basho's poetry. Their Buddhist-Taoist approach to life—defined as a reverential appreciation of the

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contemplated by the soul. Such an afterlife could appeal only to a philosopher.

What is most interesting about Plato's (via Socrates) discussion of the soul in the *Phaedo* is how the imagination can invent such an entity that is then assumed to exist and become the topic of endless investigation, elaboration, and conversation that will produce additional imaginings inspired by the original. Essentially, what Plato did was to reify (thingify) the metabolic process known as life. Yet, if the soul—this eternal, animating entity is what gives life to humans, then why do we die if the soul itself is imperishable? And if the soul and living body are thought to be truly separate, then the real purpose of the soul becomes clear: to serve as a postmortem escape pod.

And since the *Phaedo* takes place during the last day of Socrates' life, it's apropos that Socrates' friends, most in tears, would want to know the wise man's views on death and the possibility of life after death, which, of course, would require an entity such as the soul. Most of Socrates' admirers in the *Phaedo* are skeptical of the continuation of a soul-like entity, but they are feeling a little desperate now that their beloved teacher is on his death bed. What we have described in the *Phaedo* is a grasping of straws, wish-fulfillment being satisfied philosophically. Yet, as Epicurus would point out a little later even if death is the end there is nothing to fear because a person cannot be threatened or harmed if he or she does not exist.



mundane world and its creatures—realizes the highest perfection of humanity’s being in the world. But, of course, it could not last. Human perfection defined morally and aesthetically is far rarer and far more vulnerable than are the works of art and diminutive creatures Huizong admired with such affection.

### **The Artist Emperor’s Utopia**

Not only did Huizong create beautiful works of art, as an emperor he also sought to create an ideal society shaped by a Buddhist-Taoist-Confucian approach to life and by aestheticism. He thought of himself as an enlightened ruler, though he was an impractical one given that the art of ruling unavoidably involves the art of war. In his zeal for the arts and for building Taoist temples, Huizong neglected his military. If all of humanity could adopt Huizong’s Buddhist-Taoist, aesthetic approach to life, perhaps there would be no need for militaries. Huizong’s ideal society is illustrated in the famous *Qingming Shanghe Tu* scroll painted the by Zhang Zeduan.

What characterizes most the ideal society is social harmony and people being allowed to devote themselves to their respective roles and to the enjoyment of life generally. What is absent is conflict intruding into people’s lives from without or from within the city. In regard to my interpretation of *The Sun Also Rises* this would require an effort to restrain the primordial forces of chaos and maximize harmonious order. The Chinese social philosophy of a well-run society was based on Confucianism, defined as “stressing love for humanity, ancestor worship, reverence for parents, and harmony in thought and conduct.” Nevertheless, Confucianism imposed severe restraints upon the role of women in society. Their natural place was thought to be in the home, their essential roles being those of mother and wife. Their place in society was limited to associating with family members.

### **Foot-binding and Its Religious Counterpart**

Amica Yeung says that “Of the 500 [814 according to *Wikipedia*] human subjects portrayed in the painting, only about 20 are women.” She also states that painful foot-binding was used to discourage women from venturing too far from home. She says this in her essay “Emperor Song Huizong's Ideal in *Qingming Shanghe Tu*: A Confucian Society with Proper Gender Interaction” (available online). Whether or not the purpose of foot-binding was to keep women in the home or to make them more attractive to men, it, like Zeduan’s painting, does illustrate the self-denying sacrifice expected of a women Chinese society. I suspect underlying the motivation to keep women cloistered in the home was to restrain sexual desire by removing from public (male) view the primary object of sexual desire—women. This cultural attitude is based on the reality that sexual desire is a pervasive source of

disorder and conflict,<sup>372</sup> which most likely reinforced the view that the natural place of women in society is the home.

Though Huizong was an avid Taoist, the template for Chinese society was Confucianism. Both philosophies seek the avoidance of disharmony, yet Taoism takes a more laissez-faire approach to achieving harmony and avoiding disharmony. Whether recognized or not, the severe restraints imposed upon women created a conflict between the aspirations of women and the patriarchal Confucian society that repressed them. Though Chinese women might have uncritically accepted being wives and mothers as their natural domestic role in society, their oppression still created an unethical conflict—the use of social norms to restrain from self-realization and self-fulfillment a group of people (a gender) who have as much artistic, intellectual, and physical potential as men.

Foot-binding is a physical illustration of the general social constraints imposed upon women in Chinese and every other patriarchal society—and many women did rebel against the practice. Just as wrappings prevented women's feet from developing to their full natural potential, social restrictions imposed upon women prevented them from developing to their full natural potential. These practices violated two cardinal principles of Taoism: naturalness and noninterference. Foot-binding was simply contrary to nature. It also violated the cardinal principle of Buddhism: to act in such a way as to avoid causing suffering and if possible to lessen it. To be fair to Confucianism, the purpose of cloistering women in the role and place of domesticity was to enhance social harmony and to minimize social disharmony—but at the expense of preventing women from enjoying the same freedom and opportunity given to men.

The philosophical conflict here is between social-ethical-religious systems that are freedom negating, inflexible, dogmatically ideological, and repressive and those that are freedom enhancing, flexible, undogmatic, and sensitive to the feelings and inclinations of the individual. Neither approach can achieve perfect social harmony. The question is which one causes the least amount of suffering and encourages the greatest degree of individual self-realization. Clearly, the Confucian ideology allowed far more freedom to men than to women. Both Confucianism and the Abrahamic religions justify the repression of women. However, there is a profound difference. Whereas the Eastern philosophy celebrated the sexual allure of women, recognizing that it had to be constrained but never condemning it, the Abrahamic religions see women as the primary conduits of earthly sin.

### **The Ideal Woman, not so Ideal for Women**

The ideal woman, such as Mary, is one who has been sexually neutered, which is to negate in some manner her inherently sexual, sinful nature. In

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<sup>372</sup> A major theme of *The Sun Also Rises*.

JudeoChristianity Saint Paul says that ideally men—like himself and Jesus—should avoid sexual relations, that is, romantic, intimate relationships with women. Though Jesus treated women kindly, he compartmentalized them and relegated them to the periphery of society and excluded from his priestly elite just as they had always been by pre-Christian Judaism.

Let's face it; in spite of all the hoopla and affection accorded Mary, the significance of her existence in the New Testament is limited to being the mother of Jesus. She is mentioned by name twelve times in the Gospel of Luke and only in the narrative about the birth of Jesus. She is mentioned five times in the Gospel of Matthew, and four of those are in the infancy narrative. She is mentioned by name only once in Mark's gospel and referred to only twice in John's but never named.

The Quran has a chapter named after her,<sup>373</sup> but the Quran's interest in Mary seems to be to reiterate that "it would not befit God to have a child." (19:35) Of course, the contradiction here is that God impregnated Mary (if only by decree) thus is the father of her child, human or otherwise, whether or not he likes being designated as such. *Wikipedia* says Mohammad had eleven or thirteen wives. I simply cannot see how allowing men to have a bevy of wives doesn't lessen the status women in relation to that of men, in part by limiting the role of women to performing domestic duties. Clearly, the main role of women is to produce offspring but also to provide men with sexual variety. Muhammad also had four concubines, all of whom were slaves. To me what is lacking about the women in the Quran is individuality. Men of distinctive personality are mentioned often and stand out prominently in the Quran, but women are usually referred to in a generic way in discussions of inheritance, divorce, treatment of widows, etc. Women are respected, but that is not the same as being admired.<sup>374</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> Christian Mary is the only woman mentioned by name in the Quran, which seems to push Muslim women further into the background. A non-Muslim reader of the Quran gets the impression that in Islam the role of women is passively supportive. They are the invisible gender because it's impossible for them to emerge from their traditionally assigned domestic roles—servants of both men and God. Even in the New Testament, Mary as an individual has nothing to offer the world other than a son who will become the world's benefactor by serving as God's spokesman. As the Quran makes clear, God sends only masculine messengers.

<sup>374</sup> Recently Maryam Mirzakhani, an Iranian woman who presently teaches at Stanford University, received the Fields Medal, the most prestigious award in the field of mathematics. Any person deserves to be respected, but simply being a person doesn't merit admiration. To be admired requires extraordinary accomplishment that is unique, that stands out, and that is individualistic in nature. Men are not admired for simply being good fathers. Being a good father is expected of men who have children. Men who are admired stand out for their unique accomplishments in science, philosophy, medicine, art, politics, sports, etc. The same is true for women, yet by being limited to domestic roles women have been prevented from pursuing achievements that would gain them admiration. That's more than unfair; it's cruel because it denies women control over their lives thus prevents them from

And as I've mentioned, Allah is angrily insulted by the notion that he would have daughters, as if were he to have offspring they certainly would be sons. According to the Quran, men are successful if they have wealth and sons. (68:14) The various translations mention children or sons, not daughters). However, the lack of equality is also seen in the discussion of inheritance: "GOD decrees a will for the benefit of your children; the male gets twice the share of the female." (4:11) This may have been an improvement over the way women were viewed and treated in pre-Islam Arabia. However, one would expect God to treat males and females equally.

As far as I recall there is no reference in the Quran to women being successful.<sup>375</sup> Here are four other passages from the Quran that reveal the status of women in Islamic society:

It is made lawful for you to go in to your wives on the night of the fast. (2:187)

O Prophet, tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of believers to let down upon them their over-garments. (33:59)

Fair-seeming to men is made the love of desires, of women and sons and hoarded treasures of gold and silver and well-bred horses and cattle and tilth. This is the provision of the life of this world. (3:14)

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend (to support them) from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient (to Allah and to their husbands), and guard in the husband's absence what Allah orders them to guard (e.g. their chastity, their husband's property, etc.). As to those women on whose part you see ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds, (and last) beat them (lightly, if it is useful), but if they return to obedience, seek not against them means (of annoyance). (4:34)

Success is something that is achieved, but achievement is an approach to life that is denied to women. And that is pretty much true in the Bible as well. Mary's is the most famous female character in the New Testament (in the world, for that matter), yet she is esteemed primarily for passively and obediently accepting the role of motherhood. The Old Testament does offer a couple women of admirable achievement. I have in mind the Books of Ester and Judith. Yet, such women are a

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achieving personal, individualistic self-realization—rather than having to passively surrender themselves to generic social roles that patriarchal societies impose upon them.

<sup>375</sup> Though we know from other sources that Muhammad's first wife, Khadijah, was already a very successful merchant when she hired Muhammad to work for her as a caravan agent. Yet, her success as a woman was achieved before the arrival of Islam.

rarity. The Bible generally is about the accomplishments of great men and a male deity.<sup>376</sup>

### **Abrahamic Totalitarianism**

The Abrahamic religions are essentially authoritarian and even totalitarian in their use of coercion to control the minds and lives of believers. The restraints are much stricter and limiting for women than they are for men; nevertheless, the lives and minds of men are also severely constrained. In the Old Testament gentiles are slaughtered with glee and dissenters are killed or scorned. In the New Testament Jesus is crucified for engaging in freedom of thought and speech. Yet, no religious text is as critical of freedom of thought and speech as is the Quran:

“The disbelievers are steeped in arrogance and hostility. How many generations We [Allah] have destroyed before them! They all cried out, once it was too late, for escape. The disbelievers think it strange that a prophet of their own people has come to warn them: They say ‘He is just a lying sorcerer. How can he claim that all the gods are but one God? What an astonishing thing [to claim]!’ Their leaders depart saying, ‘Walk away! Stay faithful to

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<sup>376</sup> Still, achievement in societies dominated by the Abrahamic myths is quite limited for both men and women. Life is reduced to becoming God’s subject. Any achievement outside religion is of subordinate value and looked upon with suspicion. All one needs to do is compare the achievements of the ancient Greeks with those of the ancient Jews, Christians before the Renaissance, and Muslims past and present.\* What we find among the ancient Greeks is a multitude of remarkable achievements in fields some of which the Greeks themselves invented. This flowering of creativity occurred in part because the Greek mind was not oppressed by and preoccupied with religious concerns, restrictions, and obligations.

\*I explain above (p. 74) that the Islam’s Golden Age had more to do with the contributions of the sophisticated civilizations conquered by the Arab Muslim barbarians (what else would one call them?) and less to do with the religion of Islam. In addition, the religion was probably the greatest reason for the Golden Age coming to an end.

To be creative people must have the freedom to think and do as they please. As it turns out, the greatest accomplishments of the Abrahamic religions are not ideas, given most are mythical and thus false. What stands out are the works of art inspired by the religions—primarily that of Christian architecture, sculpture, painting and literature. The prohibition against depicting representational images and the suspicion that secular art is sinful, limited artistic creativity among Jews (until recently) and Muslims. The great irony I find in appreciating the art inspired by the Abrahamic religions is that as magnificent as it can be (e.g., the cathedral Notre-Dame de Paris) it’s based on a false understanding and interpretation of the world. Yet, I can admire the magnificent religious works of the ancient Greeks, in part because they are really celebrations of the beauties of the mundane world. Greek sculptures of gods and goddesses celebrate the beauty of the human body. They are the body deified.

your gods!’ ... It was not without purpose that We created the heavens and the earth and everything in between. That may be what the disbelievers assume—how they will suffer in the fire.” (38:2-6 & 38:27)

The disbelievers are, in fact, doubting critical thinkers. They want more proof than the words of a prophet offering a new religion that requires their giving up their old religion. The Quran also warns those expressing alternative perspectives on religion:

There is the sort of person who pays for *distracting tales*, intending, without any knowledge, to lead others from God’s way, and to hold it up to ridicule. There will be humiliating torment for him. (31:6)

This sort of person would include Socrates, Jesus Christ, and Darwin.

Finally, the Quran describes the Biblical David being told, “Do not follow your desires, lest they divert you from God’s path; those who wander from His path will have painful torment.” (38:26) David’s behavior is often morally despicable as in the case alluded to here: David’s seducing Bathsheba, wife of Uriah, whom David has killed. But the message being directed to everyone is that Allah demands total loyalty and obedience. These demands are what make the Abrahamic religions totalitarian. They want automatons for believers, that is, total surrender of the self.

### **Suffering Submission to Lessen Suffering**

The authoritarian-totalitarian approaches to religion unavoidably cause suffering. As a social philosophy containing elements of Buddhism and Taoism, Confucianism seeks social harmony, the result of which would be less suffering-producing disharmony. However, it does this by imposing a rather ridged behavioral template that defines acceptable behavior. As we’ve seen, in the case of women, the template limits the possibilities for self-realization. Thus harmony is preserve by restraining the behavior of individuals, thus creating a potential conflicting or clashing relationship between individuals and the social roles they are expected to perform. It is this conflict that can result in various forms of suffering for individuals who feel painfully (physically or mentally) restrained by the social roles imposed upon them. And believing the restraints are unjustly or unequally imposed would further aggravate their suffering.

### **Compassionate Restraint**

Taoist-Buddhism takes a more inclusive approach to conflict, disorder, and suffering. Buddhism recognizes that those who suffer are living creatures—human and nonhuman. Thus, from the Buddhist point of view order is not an inherent good in-itself. Ethically, order is good only when it prevents and lessens suffering. Society is an abstraction that cannot suffer. Only its inhabitants suffer. And if a less

constrained society—less tightly organized—produces less suffering and greater happiness, then it is from a Buddhist perspective the more desirable society.

Taoism recognizes absolute harmony would be a condition in which conflict, thus suffering, is absent. As Freud would later recognize, Taoism understands that societies are an inherent source of conflict because societies necessarily impose a broad range of restraints upon people's behavior. However, Taoism accepts that such conflicts are justified if they prevent greater, more harmful forms of conflict. Rivers sometimes must be restrained so they do not flood fields and communities. In the case of the restraints imposed upon Chinese women, however, a Taoist view would recognize that such restraints placed half the population in a condition that was repressive and conflicting. And, I believe that the Taoist would argue doing so vastly and unjustly increased suffering.

My point here is that Taoism does not consider harmony inherently good but good only in so far as it results in something beneficial, such as lessening harm to living creatures. Buddhism and Taoism offer different approaches to addressing the causes of suffering. Buddhism describes various causes and various solutions to suffering. Taoism tends to discuss order and disorder, chaos and discord as metaphysical principles that shape existence. Both philosophies are primarily concerned with human beings' relationships within the mundane world—how they relate to one another, to society, and to nature. Their relationship to God is irrelevant—either because God doesn't exist or is noticeably uninvolved in the goings-on of the mundane world.

### **Inhumane Restraint**

The focus and concern of the Abrahamic religions are antithetical to those of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. The former are obsessed with serving the transcendent reality of God, and the latter are concerned with humanity's welfare in the here and now of the mundane world. As I said earlier, for the Abrahamic faith ethics and value are God-centered; for the Confucianism and Taoist-Buddhism, they are humanity-centered. The God of the Jews is not concerned with the suffering of humanity and only secondarily concerned with the suffering of his "chosen people" or servants. The following passage from Deuteronomy clearly expresses the Abrahamic god's view toward those people who, for whatever reason, are classified as infidels:

And when the Lord your God gives it [a conquered Canaanite city] into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword, but the women and the little ones, the livestock, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as plunder for yourselves. And you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you. Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not cities of the nations here. But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance, you

shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded, that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the Lord your God. (20:13-18)

The Jewish God (Yahweh, Christ, or Allah) sanctified conquest, slaughter, and plunder. At the time of the above event, Jews were not interested in converts. Pagans were an abomination to be destroyed or avoided. JudeoChristianity and Islam took conversion as their mission in the world, thus would spare the lives of infidels who surrendered their lives to Christ or Allah. Conversion—coerced or voluntary—is a religious form of foot-binding. It controls the development of the personality and thus its outcome. This is true of all religions to some degree, but shaping of the personality is especially severe among the Abrahamic religions because they are designed for one main purpose—to impose restraints upon the minds and behaviors of their followers.

### **Suffering on God's Behalf**

Clearly, suffering producing conflict is a defining characteristic of the Abrahamic religions. They are essentially expressions of their God's declarations of war upon all of humanity—including, ironically, one another. Conflict and suffering are not to be avoided but to be pursued. Suffering is not a byproduct in the Abrahamic religions but part of their methodology. Suffering on God's behalf is considered meritorious. In addition, suffering is a primary enticement to inspire religious conversion, loyalty, and obedience. Even God and his angels are at war with fallen angels and the demons who were once pagan deities, though apparently spiritual entities such as angels can suffer no physical pain. However, most appalling is that this declaration of war upon humanity originated with God, not humans. I find the Abrahamic God to be a divine hypocrite given that he causes so much suffering for humanity while his divine nature precludes suffer. It is as if he watches from his celestial throne the bloodletting of religiously inspired gladiatorial games that he invented.

### **Hateful Deities Mass Produce Hateful Believers**

The natural tendency of believers is to internalize their God's perspective toward the mundane world and humanity. It would not be logical to do otherwise since God embodies the ideal attitude toward the world and its inhabitants. This means members of the Abrahamic faiths internalize the extremely negative and hateful mindset of the Abrahamic God toward people who reject his religions for other religions or for a non-religious belief system. This is the reason why the histories of the Abrahamic religions are characterized by centuries of endless suffering-producing religious wars and sectarian conflicts. And even if



JudeoChristianity or JudeoIslam were successful in converting humanity to their brand of Judaism, what kind of global society would be achieved? A totalitarian society that produces individuals in a manner similar to a factory's production of widgets—which are designed and constructed in an automated fashion. Widgets are not allowed to constructive themselves because then they might become something that does not serve the interest of the corporation.

How radically different from the three Eastern spiritual philosophies that seek to create harmony and lessen suffering. Confucianism seeks social harmony as its ultimate goal. Such a goal could become totalitarian and suffering producing if its motivation was ideological or religious—subservience to an idea or to God. In both cases what is being served is an abstraction. Buddhism is humanistically centered upon reducing suffering in the world. This would include not causing animals unnecessary suffering. This is a moral good in itself but benefits humans as well. Callousness toward creatures that can suffer can be carried over to humans. In the Abrahamic religions living creatures have no inherent value. Their value is only utilitarian—to serve humans or to showcase God's creative powers and beneficence toward humans. Until the destruction of the Temple, animal slaughter was a central part of Judaism's mode of worship. And Yahweh was very finicky:

Bulls or rams or goats are the animals that you may burn on the altar as sacrifices to please me [Yahweh]. You may also offer sacrifices voluntarily or because you made a promise, or because they are part of your regular religious ceremonies. The smell of the smoke from these sacrifices is pleasing to me. (Numbers 15:3)

Taoism offers two simple yet remarkably effective principles that can enhance harmony thus lessen suffering. The first is to avoid thinking and acting in ways that contribute to disharmony thus greater suffering. The second is to take a laissez-faire or noninterference approach to how one relates to the world, especially toward people but toward nature generally. The underlying idea of noninterference is that interference unavoidably leads to some form of conflict thus suffering. Yet, since the main purpose of noninterference is to avoid creating suffering, the operating principle of noninterference can be suspended if doing so lessen some form of suffering producing conflict. So rivers are damned if doing so is beneficial. And in this regard it's worth mentioning that there is also an aesthetical motivation involved with noninterference. The beauty of a river is compromised when the river is damned. The bound foot is an aesthetic monstrosity.

### **The Yin-Yang of Confucian Restraint**

At first glance, Confucianism appears to be a philosophy of interference, and it is, but is so because the natural inclination of humans is to interfere, to engage in

conflicting (combative, aggressive, antagonistic, contentious) behaviors that cause both suffering and ugliness. So Confucianism attempts to channel (restrain) human behavior so that it flows meaningfully and beneficially, rather than destructively. Still, the focus of Confucianism is on society—the creation of a humane society—rather than on the individual, allowing all individuals the opportunity to flourish as individuals. The yin-yang image is revealing here. It expresses a delicate balance of conflicting tendencies. Aggressive, intemperate behaviors are reined in but not blocked. Thus, the yin and yang restrain one another in a relationship that allows both to flow harmoniously. In part, this is why the image itself is aesthetically flawless. From a Confucian Taoist-Buddhist perspective the yin-yang principle-image is the ideal to which both the individual and society should aspire.

### **Judaism's Religions of Disharmony**

One of the noble attributes of yin-yang is harmonious tolerance. And it is tolerance that is so woefully lacking in the Abrahamic religions and in the secular version Marxism. Their various scriptures are declarations of war upon the world. Were any one of them completely successful, the result would not be a world of light but of darkness—a total negation of individual freedom. From the perspective of these religions the negation of freedom—to live and worship as one pleases—is a justified because all values are subordinate to God and subservient to his will. The goal of Judaistic religions is to subjugate gentiles, infidels, disbelievers, and heretics to God's will through conversion, achieved through force or rhetorical persuasion.

The scriptures' subterfuge is that the stated purpose is the salvation of the individual, but this is, in fact, not the main purpose at all—which is getting all of humanity to serve God's will to be adored, worshiped, and obeyed. The rhetorical duplicity is revealed here in what the all-benevolent deity is saving humanity from: punishment he has prepared for those who, for whatever reason, do not adore, worship, and obey him. I find it quite unbecoming for God to behave like a spoiled child who threatens to throw a fit if he is not the center of attention. And even in the end, harmony will not be achieved. Judaism eventually has gentiles worshiping and serving Zion. (Isaiah 61& 62) In JudeoChristianity and JudeoIslam harmony will be achieved for a few in Heaven at the expense of the many damned to exist in the painful pandemonium of Hell. And JudeoMarxism will achieve harmony by keeping people in constant state of oppression.

### **Hell = Pure Disharmony**

All three Abrahamic scriptures explicitly state that Yahweh's, Christ's, and Allah's punishments are horrific, but without a doubt the Quran's descriptions of Hell are the most vivid and terrifying. The following is just one of many: Those who reject God's scripture and messengers will have "iron collars and chains around their necks..." be "dragged into scalding water, and then burned in the Fire." (40:71-72) It

is a strange God who offers salvation from death yet will condemn most of humanity to an eternity of the most exquisite suffering. It's difficult not to suspect that his motivation *is not* to save human beings from death, which in-itself is a state free from suffering. And one must ask, "Is this the best that God could do?" One would think—logically—that the all-powerful, all-wise, all-good creator of the Universe would have avoided the dungeon of eternal torment in his plan for humanity.

Hell is fundamentally immoral. Civilized human beings condemn the use of dungeons and tortures. Shouldn't God do the same? What is moral for humanity should be moral for God, but isn't because God places himself (actually his believers do) above human morality—that is to say, human-centered morality. The irony here is that nature comes across as being morally superior to God. Nature does not engage in revenge, torture, or punishment after death. Human nature, however, does (postmortem torture being imagined), which suggests that there is an aspect of human nature that is unnatural (perverse).

As Epicurus and his devotee Lucretius point out, the only suffering caused by death occurs while a person is alive, and that is the fear of death. As the Quran repeatedly states, Allah must give life to the dead if he is going to reward or punish them. The dead no longer exist, and existence is a *sine qua non* for suffering to occur. So what is his motivation? I offer that God needs Hell for leverage, to frighten humanity into adoring, worshiping, and obeying him. And to be honest, what scripture makes abundantly clear is that the most appealing aspect of going to Heaven is avoiding going to Hell—not avoiding death, not being in God's presence, not living forever like a tourist in a five star luxury resort.<sup>377</sup>

### **Hell's Injustice**

And it is also revealing that according to the Quran sinners and the sinless will be found in the fires of Hell. For example, Marie Curie, winner of two Nobel Prizes, "known for her honesty and moderate life style," was an agnostic, which would qualify her as a disbeliever destined for the blazing fire. And had she not been an agnostic, she would have been a Catholic, thus believing God has a son. It was, by the way, the deaths of her mother and sister that caused her to give up her faith. At least in Hell she will be with her father, who was an atheist. From a purely humanistic

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<sup>377</sup> Then again, what we also find in the Islamic religion is what we find in the mundane world: that it is a priestly-political elite that benefits most from terrorizing people to surrender themselves to God, because by surrendering to God they are actually surrendering to the dictates of religious institutions that are traditionally intertwined with political institutions, most perfectly in theocracies. Such control makes it possible for religious and political elites to live as royalty, often midst a sea of poverty. And as patriarchal religions they bequeaths to men power over women (which seems to be the case in Paradise as well). So to some degree, all men in an Islamic society are beneficiaries of their religion. Using Saudi Arabia as an example, I don't see that women greatly benefit from the religion.

perspective, Marie Curie was a saint of a human being, not a sinner. Thus, the Islamic Hell will be filled with virtuous people whose only sin was to misconceive or disbelieve Allah.<sup>378</sup> These innocent people will be accompanied by the most heinous of sinners who for whatever reason were not devotees of Allah—such as Hitler, Stalin, and Genghis Khan who was responsible for the deaths of millions of people.

### **Criminals in Paradise**

Regardless of how horrific a Muslim's crimes are against humanity, being a devout believer is like having a get out of jail free card. The multitude of Muslims in our day and age who are slaughtering men, women, and children can expect to have their crimes forgiven and be sent to a stream-laden garden paradise. In fact, if

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<sup>378</sup> Actually, not Allah but Muhammad. No one experiences Allah directly, not even Muhammad converses with Allah but with an angel (archangel Gabriel). Ergo, disbelievers doubt or disbelieve what Muhammad said or says via the Quran—a man who CLAIMS to have had an ongoing conversation NOT with God but with one of his angels. The Quran makes clear repeatedly that the doubts of disbelievers are directed to what men like themselves are telling them. In one case, messengers are told by the nonbelievers, “You are only men like ourselves. The Lord of Mercy has sent nothing; you are just lying.” (36:15-17) Muhammad states the obvious when he says, “It is only the disbelievers who dispute God's revelations.”\* (40:4) Of course, and they have every logical reason not to believe a man who claimed to be the recipient of divine revelations delivered to him by an angel during a twenty-year period.

\*In other words, it's only disbelievers who disbelieve. That they disbelieve is not the issue. The reasons why they disbelieve are.

The implication is that doubting and critical thinking are sinful. And they are as far as Allah is concerned: “We shall certainly give the disbelievers a taste of severe punishment.” (41:27) This message contradicts normal human thinking: that just because somebody claims that what he says is true does not make what he says true. Simply claiming a statement is true doesn't make it true. Words cannot be evidence for themselves. Something more than words is needed. Verbal or written claims must be empirically or logical justified. And Allah is unjust when he condemns people for thinking logically and critically. The so-called logic of the Quran would have us believing the words of every street-corner preacher are true. Allah and his spokesmen (prophets) demand that people be gullible—to deny that part of their humanity called reason. That is a crime against humanity.

On the other hand, it is not a crime to be gullible—foolish and imprudent, yes, but not a crime. Muhammad has every right to believe he spoke with an angel, but he has no right to expect others to believe his claim of having done so. He should recognize the evidential (epistemological) difference between the two sources of information—first-hand versus second-hand. And nobody would doubt a message deliver to him or her by God himself or even by one of his angels. So why doesn't God do that, since he has countless angels, rather than relying on a handful of human messengers? The moral incentive would be to avoid causing a lot of unnecessary bloodshed and to avoid filling Hell will billions of doubters.

slaughtering those men, women, and children was done on the behalf of Muhammad or Allah, then no crime was committed. And the same can be said for the fate of the most evil Christians—and they were copious in the past<sup>379</sup>—who seek forgiveness for earthly sins.<sup>380</sup> Burning in the Islamic Hell along with Curie will be many religious true believers who mistakenly believed that God has a son (Christ) or worse yet daughters or that God has partners (other deities). In light of the Quran, any (male) Muslim would prefer a son to a daughter. When told that his wife has given birth to a daughter, “his face grows dark and he is filled with gloom.” (43:17) Odd given that Curie alone won the same number of Nobel Prizes in science as Muslims have: two.

### **Hell: God’s Sacrificial Altar**

What are people who are sent to Hell for rejecting God? They are sacrifices to God. Sacrificing animals and humans to God has a very long history. The pagans were the first—and last, I believe—to engage in the bloody business. Judaism originated as a pagan religion and the Jewish Temple was a sacrificial slaughterhouse. But the Jews had to give up sacrificial slaughter once the Romans destroyed the Temple. JudeoChristians turned the sacrificial tradition on its head by having God himself being sacrificed on the cross for humanity’s benefit.<sup>381</sup> In his *Five Stages of Greek Religion* Gilbert Murray says that JudeoChristians were “pinning their faith to the approaching end of the world by fire. They announced the end of the world as near, and they rejoiced in the prospect of its destruction.” (189-190) Strange indeed is a religion whose members long for the destruction of the world that would also “plunge the rest of mankind [nonChristians] in everlasting torment.” (190)

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<sup>379</sup> Such men as those who condemned and imprisoned Galileo and those who had Giordano Bruno and Joan of Arc burned at the stake. These men (yes, always men) represent millions of JudeoChristians who committed crimes against humanity in the name of Jesus Christ or simply committed horrific crimes for their own benefit but then found Christ and asked his forgiveness. All these moral monsters will go to Heaven, which makes going to Paradise or Heaven less attractive to people who find such “justice” repugnant.

<sup>380</sup> In God’s “eyes” the crimes committed against Galileo, Bruno, and Joan of Arc aren’t crimes at all because they were done on God’s behalf. Yes, perhaps the punishers were overly zealous, but certainly zealotry in defense of God is always forgivable. Though I find it strange that the creator of the Universe would need defending, as if he were being bullied by disbelievers. Shouldn’t God be able to defend himself? All the bullying, mockery, doubting, and disbelieving would go away if only he would pay us a visit in all his glory.

<sup>381</sup> The communion ritual has a very long history. Durant tells us in his *The Life of Greece* that in the early day each pagan household had its own god and in the fire of the family hearth offerings of food and wine were made before every meal” and “This holy communion, or sharing of food with the god, was the basic and primary act of religion in the home.” (175) Pagans, however, would find it difficult to accept the communion of JudeoChristianity, the feasting upon God’s flesh and blood. And given Christ was human, it does appear as a form of divinely sanctioned cannibalism.

The dominant theme of JudeoIslam, at least according to the Quran, is the end of the world when billions of dead will be exhumed (a ghastly sight to say the least) and judged, “the Day when the sky brings forth clouds of smoke for all to see.” (44:10) For JudeoIslam nothing matters except for the Day of Reckoning. Even obedience to God is subsumed as simply the necessary condition for avoiding the “terrible torment” of Hell. Thus, what we have here is the entire mundane world being horrifically destroyed on God’s behalf—so that he can reward his servants and punish disbelievers. Any sensible person can only hope that the disbelievers are correct.

### **The (Subconscious) Motivation behind the Abrahamic Religions**

What motivated the ancient Jews to invent a god that would condone and encourage their aggressive tendencies? Perhaps to inspire the underdog to victory? If God is one’s ally then victory is thought to be certain. This was common practice in the ancient world. Ancient Judaism, however, does more. It morally legitimizes its hatred of and aggression against others. As the ancient Jews marched into Canaan they could feel better about themselves if they believed their mission of conquest was a divinely sanctioned moral mission. They were not there simply to take land and booty that did not belong to them but to destroy evil. The land and booty was their reward. And the “in God’s name” rationalization for conquest, pillage, and plunder would be adopted by Judaism’s religious offspring JudeoChristianity and JudeoIslam.

JudeoChristianity originated as a war against the all-powerful pagan—in particular Rome. Jesus said “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10:34) He says to his disciples, “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves.” (10:16) His view of the world is very negative but not altogether incorrect. The wolf lives in *men*, yet Jesus is also sending his disciples on a mission of on wolf-like conquest. They are wolves in sheep’s clothing who seek to devourer the pagan world. At the time, his only weapon was words, yet his followers would become wolves with teeth once they acquire the military might of Rome. JudeoChristianity was adopted by a Roman emperor for the sole purpose of achieving victory in battle. Both the New Testament and the Quran are scriptures used as weapons. What I am arguing is that what one finds in the Abrahamic religions is barbarism in the fancy dress of saintliness woven from religious rhetoric.

### **La Bête Masculine**

As the Abrahamic religions abundantly illustrate—men are flawed. And most flawed of all is their masculine Abrahamic deity, who is nothing more than the deification of masculinity. In *The Sun Also Rises* perhaps the reason Jake not allowed to have Brett is that he is flawed. Symbolically, male aggression makes unachievable for humanity the beautiful world Brett represents. The Old Testament reveals ancient Jews longing for paradise, but they always seek it through conquest and aggression.

The same occurs in JudeoChristianity, JudeoIslam, and JudeoMarxism; yet violence cannot achieve utopia because it is the very thing that makes it impossible. Men like Basho and Huizong are, like postwar Jake, impotent against the destructive forces manifested in male aggression. Male aggression continually throws the human world out of balance, so that humanity rarely comes even close to achieving the state of harmony expressed by the yin-yang sign.

The beauty-loving Huizong clearly illustrates the impotency of men like himself, who, whether they admit it or not, have allowed the life-affirming feminine to influence their thinking thus their way of relating to the world. Such men rarely become the movers and shakers of politics and commerce (which usually requires some degree of aggressive willfulness). And when they do succeed in creating a golden age as Huizong did, it never lasts. Whereas Huizong “founded an art museum richer in masterpieces than any collection that China has ever again known” (*Our Oriental Heritage*, Durant 750), the Jurchen barbarians destroyed nearly all its thousands of paintings. After weeks of looting, rapes, arson, and executions, the barbarians took Huizong prisoner. He would endure eight years of poverty and disgrace before he died in captivity.

Eight centuries later the “civilized” French and British would engage in similar destruction, but they chose to steal rather than destroy Chinese artifacts. Huizong’s painting *Five-colored Parakeet on a Branch of Apricot Blossom* was originally preserved in the Old Summer Palace (in Chinese know as *Yuan Ming Yuan*, Gardens of Perfect Brightness). The palace was ransacked and destroyed by French and British soldiers during the Opium War in 1860. Today the painting is held captive in Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts.

### **Transcending la Bête Masculine**

Like all philosophers, scientists, and intellectuals generally, Huizong sought an appreciative understanding of the world and like artists he was inspired by beauty, its mystery, and its expression in nature. He sought to create a society that embodied the principles of beauty, a society that was civilized, cultured, and sophisticated—all that was contrary to the barbarism that encircled and would eventually destroy his aspiring utopia. Basho was of the same temperament as Huizong but was not saddled with political responsibilities. Whereas Huizong Taoist approach to understanding and appreciating life was very artificial, the product of instruction, discipline, and training, Basho’s Zen (Taoist-Buddhist) approach was spontaneous and natural.

Like Huizong, Basho was essentially an artist observer but unlike Huizong he could achieve oneness with what he observed. Unlike Huizong or most painters and poets, Basho crossed the divide between the artist and his or her object. At the moment, I have in mind Wordsworth’s “Solitary Reaper.” Whereas the solitary highland lass is at one with nature, even of nature, the poet remains appreciative outsider. Basho was able to transcend the divide between observer and observed yet

remain an artist. He not only achieved oneness with nature in the way Wordsworth's reaper embodies as a creature of nature living as such, but did so as a contemplator at one with the object he contemplates. The reaper, of course, never had to overcome an alienating separation between herself and nature that results from forms of social conditioning that separate the human self from the natural world. Basho, on the other hand, had to make an effort to shake off his artificial (objective?) self to achieve a sympathetic oneness with the things, creatures, and people who inhabit the natural world, the primordial world.

He did this in two ways. First, he became a creature of nature, not in the way that the farmers, fishermen, or hermits he describes are such creatures but as a wanderer detached from the artificiality of civilization. Basho reminds me of an autumn leaf, blown this way and that down whatever path that struck his fancy—or perhaps as a Wordsworthian cloud. By doing this he shook himself loose not only from civilization but also from the inclination to intrude or interfere. In accordance with a Taoist sensibility, Basho adopted toward the world and its inhabitants a passive, receptive relationship of noninterference.

What Basho did was to invite into his subjective, appreciative self the be-ing (or existential flow) of the mundane world. Occasionally he judges (expressions of disappointment human behavior) but rarely so and never harshly. Perhaps this is because he accepted that from a moral (thus artificial) perspective humans are naturally flawed.<sup>382</sup> His response to human misbehavior is often tinged with sorrow. Basho is a joyful pessimist. Even Buddha who seems to have achieved perfect detachment was acutely aware of human suffering and clearly understood that most human suffering is self-inflicted.

### Loving Oneness

To me what is most revelatory about Basho's poems and travelogues is his affectionate unity with all things. Like Huizong, Basho relates to the world—both natural and human—with a deep sense of equality. When one views the *Five-colored Parakeet on Blossoming Apricot Tree* one senses that the bird and the tree are natural treasures possessing beauty that humans can aspire to but never truly equal. Huizong's painting and Basho's poems are expressions of reverence toward nature's creatures—and human creatures when they behave with the same stoical dignity of the least of nature's creatures. The folly of humanity is to equate greatness with pomp and circumstance, with military victories and the building of empires, with great accumulations of wealth and power. As Basho makes clear, in the sweep of time the

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<sup>382</sup> The flaw is complex rather than simple, thus cannot be reduced simply to willful malevolence, but it does seem to always involve some form or degree of moral deficiency, such as acting in an unthinking fashion. Mindlessly following one's inclinations or the collective behaviors of society. What comes to mind is joining a festive parade of soldiers marching off to war.



greatest empires are as fragile as any of nature's creatures and in beauty are their inferiors.

Basho's relationship to the world is aesthetic rather than scientific; and I am tempted to say it is more personal. He loves nature's creations. One knows this because only love could inspire him to endure hardships in order to seek out nature's natural treasures; only love could inspire his poems and paintings. Yet, today I believe many natural scientists love entities they study as much as Basho did. What both also share and reveal is the role of the subject-object relationship as a profound source of meaning for human existence, and perhaps humanity's unique contribution to existence as appreciative observers and interpreters. What Basho achieved that was so remarkable is intimate oneness with the beings of Being, nature's creations, especially her creatures. Basho's heartfelt appreciation is due in part to his acute awareness of the finitude that he all things share in common. For all entities existence is a momentary event. Like the ancient Greeks, Basho recognized that the finitude of all things is the basis for existence being essentially a tragic affair. What Basho offers as a revelation is radically contrary and superior to the revelations of the Abrahamic religions: a loving appreciation of the mundane world and all its inhabitants. Basho's way of life is essentially religious because it embodies an attitude of piety toward the natural world and its inhabitants.

### **Worshipping the Great No-Thing**

The Abrahamic religions worship God as humanity's creator and provider. But that which they worship is a figment of the Hebrew imagination. It is an entity that cannot be experienced but only imagined. We know without any doubt whatsoever how the nature gave birth to the Universe we live in, to the earth we live on, to the sun and moon and planets of our solar system. We know how nature gave birth to the human species and how nature (via mothers) gives birth to individuals. Allah hates those who doubt him, but there is no reason not to doubt the existence of the Abrahamic god or other gods. And God did not give humanity morality; humans invented morality as a way of bestowing upon humans the right not to be treated arbitrarily. Today, we see exactly how humans bring about moral principles with the emergence of a new moral perspective that has accorded animals certain moral rights. In addition, considered from a moral perspective, the attitude and behavior of the Abrahamic god are atrocious.

### **Basho's Religion of Equality**

The religious attitude displayed by Basho is not one that worships nature and life generally but reveres it. There is no subordination of the self to nature. It is a relationship of equality: the observer and the observed are essential to realization of each's value. Using the *Five-colored Parakeet on Blossoming Apricot Tree* as an illustration (of what many of Basho's poems do), the beauty and value of the parakeet

painted by Huizong is realized through Huizong's presence. Huizong does not worship the bird but reveres it. And that reverence characterizes the manner in which he and Basho relate to the world—both human and natural.

In the Quran God says, "The life of this world is but play and amusement." (47:36) Only a transcendent being that need not struggle to survive, that never suffers emotional or physical pain, and that never dies could say such a thing about life in the mundane world. Basho knew better. That is why Basho's relationship to the world is full of sympathy. The word *sympathy* comes from the Greek, meaning "having a fellow feeling." It is logically impossible for God to have a sympathetic relationship to humanity. He (more accurately "it") is totally other, totally alien.<sup>383</sup> He/it is no more capable of relating sympathetically to humans than gravity is. This is to say that if God did have a relationship to humans it would be something like gravity—influential but without emotion or awareness, both of which are attributes that only conscious *entities* can possess. Not being a thing, God doesn't even qualify for the existential status that gravity possesses.

### **The Mundane World: Means or End?**

It is only within the context of the Abrahamic religions that life in the mundane world is a game, a pastime, a diversion, a means to an end, a road rather than a destination, a preliminary event, a test only, etc. God and only God is the *raison d'être* for the existence of the Universe and all its contents, in particular humanity. The Abrahamic god created humanity solely that he might be revered, feared, and worshipped; thus, from God's perspective any meaning not related to him is trivial. The Quran makes it vividly and repetitively clear that the purpose of the Universe's existence is Judgment Day—when god will judge humans according to their allegiance and obedience to him.

But, of course, humans such as Basho see the mundane world and its creatures differently. They are an end in themselves, the only *raison d'être* for existence, in

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<sup>383</sup> Of course, the Abrahamic religions anthropomorphize God while at the same time claiming *he* is totally alien to whatever can be conceived. They want God to absolutely transcend any and all natural attributes. That makes sense given that he/it is a No-thing (because entities have limits and God is without limits, thus *he/it* is misleading as well). They want God to be totally mysterious, yet the Judaism has him stomping about angrily as he hunts down little Adam and Eve hiding in the bushes, busily sewing themselves their first set of garments, so that he can punish them; JudeoChristianity goes so far as to have him appear in drag as a human being; and JudeoIslam has him making threats like a surly monarch throughout the Quran. You can't have it both ways—an absolutely mysterious, inconceivable, No-thing behaving and acting like a human being. The ancient Jews created a deity that is a contradiction, a squircle deity: a walking, talking, bragging, ranting, haranguing, demanding, meddling, hating, punishing, killing, etc., deity that is supposed to be totally nonhuman but thinks and behaves only as a human (with a nasty disposition) would.

part because they are sum total of existence, but also because they possess beauty (a quality not available to a divine No-thing) and mystery. They are, as well, the family of finitude, to which humans belong. The Zenist Taoist-Buddhist tradition to which Basho belongs reveres existence rather than transcendence. The mystery, suffering, and beauty of each individual being, which is the focus of the Taoist-Buddhist tradition, are what Basho's poetry illustrates. What Basho understood is that judgment day is each and every day, but it is not so much a day of judgment as it is a day of appreciation—appreciation not of a divine No-thing but of one's fellow beings who, like oneself, are here today and gone tomorrow, and once gone always gone.

Unlike the mentality of the Abrahamic religions, for Basho being a witness to the world, not God, is humanity's most profound calling. God is not our father, mother, friend, or companion. Look as one may, he is nowhere to be found; but everywhere are to be found family, friends, and companions. When Basho lost his house to fire, a new house was built for him by his friends and disciples—not by God. When I see family, friends, and strangers sacrifice their time, money, effort, and even their lives to rescue others from dire circumstances, God's promise of a better life to come seems hollow.

### **Learning from Basho**

We learn from Basho the proper way to relate to the world—with an attitude of appreciative reverence. Nowhere in Basho's worldview will one find hatred. Love is the defining theme of Basho's relationship to world. Nowhere do you find Basho damning others for what they do or believe. In other words, nowhere in Basho does one find the negativity toward the things and creatures of the mundane world that is so pervasive in Abrahamic scriptures. Reading Basho's poems instills in the reader a peaceful tranquility and a renewed feeling of reverence toward mundane world. One learns from Basho that to exist in the mundane world for that brief moment that is one's lifetime is a rarely given privilege to be an appreciative witness to the be-ing of the world.

Why does one not find in Basho the bitterness that pervades the Abrahamic scriptures? Part of the answer is found in the spiritual philosophies—Taoism & Buddhism—that guided Basho's thinking and infuse his art and poetry. The mundane world is brimming with sublimity and beauty. Hatred does not come naturally to nature. It is essentially the product of the human mind inspired by human behavior and deified in the Abrahamic religions. When one who has grown up in the Abrahamic tradition accompanies Basho on one of his pilgrimages into nature, one leaves behind notions of sin, damnation, righteousness, self-loathing and contempt for the mundane. For such a person, following Basho is a return to reality and to a renewed appreciation of life in this world.

## The Bond of Finitude

Carl Sagan tells us in his television series *Cosmos* that “the earth and every living thing are made of star-stuff.”<sup>384</sup> That is a reminder of our profound affinity to nature and the mundane world. It is us and we are it. Basho’s fellow-feeling (agape<sup>385</sup>) toward all of nature’s creations must be rooted in the understanding that as nature’s offspring we are all siblings. But I also believe that Basho felt a closeness to all things because of their finitude. Because they are finite, all things eventually perish and all creatures suffer to some degree. It is clear to me from his poetry that Basho was most sensitive to the condition of finitude. Like poet Alfred Tennyson Basho lost his closest friend, Todo Yoshitada, and writing companion at a young age. At the age of nine Basho had been assigned to the young nobleman Yoshitada as a study companion. Yoshitada was eleven years old, yet in every way Basho’s senior. He taught Basho to write linked verse. The two friends shared a love of poetry as they grew into manhood together. Yoshitada’s death at the age of twenty-five could not have been other than a life changing event for Basho. Yoshitada was destined to replace his father as the governor of the providence. That a young man so full of promise could be so easily struck down must have impressed upon Basho the frailty of finitude. Apparently, Tennyson and Basho also shared similar religious views—that the sacred resides in the world that surrounded them and nowhere else.

## Jesus: Once a Friend but No Longer

I find strange the claim that we have a friend in Jesus. To me the statement is meaningless. In what way is Jesus a friend? Unquestionably, the historical Jesus was

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<sup>384</sup> Let me say here that when I speak of neopaganism it is Carl Sagan’s worldview that I have in mind. His *Cosmos* is science expressed poetically, artistically. It is an exquisite expression of Sagan’s appreciative understanding of the world. If the Universe could speak for itself, it would express gratitude for Sagan’s reverential revelation of the great cosmic drama that began with the big bang and consummated in the minds artists, philosophers, and scientists such as Huizong, Basho, Aristotle, Lucretius, and Einstein and Sagan.

<sup>385</sup> From a JudeoChristian perspective *agape* is defined “the love of God or Christ for humankind.” The Gospel of John says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life says (3:16) or in First John, “He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.” (4:8) However, these verses contain a glaring contradiction. God *is not* unconditionally loving. Those he loves—a very small minority of humanity—will enjoy everlasting life in some version of paradise but everyone else will spend an eternity burning in Hell. And not even the most strained, convoluted, garbled argument could make such Hitler-like treatment of humanity into some weird expression of love. The fact is a god who would condemn people to a blazing fire cannot be a god of love. Even the love the Abrahamic god supposedly “feels” toward those who worship him is egotistical. True love must be to some degree must be unconditional. That is certainly the case for the kind of love agape is supposed to be. Sorry, but the Abrahamic god doesn’t qualify for “God is love” status.

a true friend to many people he shared his life with—the people he spoke with, ate with, and aided. However, I do question the claims that the postmortem, mythical supernatural Jesus can be a friend. How can a ghost be one's friend? True friendship is found in Tennyson's relationship with his friend Arthur Hallam and in Basho's relationship with his friend Yoshitada. A character in a story can never be a friend except in an odd sense, such as Elwood P. Dowd's friendship with an imaginary rabbit in the movie *Harvey*. And certainly the god of the Old Testament and Quran are incapable of having friends. What they have are subjects.

One of my favorite poems by Basho describes a crow on a bare branch:

On a withered branch  
A crow has alighted:  
Nightfall in autumn. (Taken from oaks.nvg.org.)

The poem was written five years before Basho's death. It suggests the endings that all finitude must face. In his *Basho and his Interpreters* Ueda provides a painting by Morikawa Kyoriku that was inspired by the poem. The crow in the painting is a rather raggedy looking, as if it too is approaching the end of its life. The crow lacks the enchanting beauty of Huizong's parakeet, yet it is painted with affection. To an aged person the bird expresses the weariness of growing old after having lived a long life filled with wonder, pleasure, happiness, suffering, loss, and tragedy. Poetry was Basho's branch from which he observed and meditated on life. The crow and the artist are one joined together by the artist's sympathy.

### **A Tragically Missed Opportunity**

Had humanity adopted Basho's appreciative, non-aggressive approach to living in the mundane world it might have achieved paradise for itself, and Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* would never have been written because the Great War would not have occurred and atomic bombs would not have been invented and dropped on Basho's homeland. Instead, huMANity chose to continue to make peace in this world an impossible dream. The solution offered by the Abrahamic religions—even as they declared war upon the world—was a postmortem peaceful kingdom, thus religions that long for death. Eastern religions have been often called by the West religions of resignation, yet giving up on peace is a dominant theme of the Abrahamic religions. They assume that humanity is incapable of creating a peaceful paradise for itself and thus must depend upon God to do so—but only in the afterlife and only for his servants. This is Abrahamic religions' self-defeating message to humanity: *Don't bother to do what only God can do.*

Karl Marx rejected the defeatist gospel of the Abrahamic religions. He believed that humanity could do what God refused to do, create on earth a humane society. Unfortunately, like its religious predecessors, Marxism also declared war

upon the world inspiring endless bloodletting and creating a Hell on earth for those trapped in the Marxist totalitarian dystopias. And after two world wars and the Holocaust certain nations jettisoned nay-saying superstition and ideological extremism and created in a rather short period of time societies that are truly humane. The Nordic countries of Europe, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, have been especially successful in creating a high quality of life for their citizens, and they are countries that rank among the lowest in church attendance.

But perhaps Basho's greatest revelation—revealed to us through his poetry—is that the mundane world is full of enchanting miracles that make existence in the mundane world a heavenly experience for those people who take the time to understand and appreciate them. A paradisiac afterlife is not necessary since nature has already provide the best possible of all worlds. Nature, not God, offered humanity a Promise Land. If nature's promise land turned out to be more hellish than heavenly, that has been mostly humanity's doing. Human beings have proven themselves very good at ruining a good thing for themselves and for others. In fact, the notions of Heaven and Hell would be unnecessary inventions if evil people didn't ruin the good life for good people in the here and now. But since they do, those good people can only hope that there will be an afterlife where they will get a second chance at living a good life and where the evil people who made the good life impossible for good people will receive their just punishment. But all that is just wishful thinking. And really adults know that because they constantly tell their children not to squander their youth or waste their lives because adults know their children will not get a second chance.

### **Heaven: Dwelling Place of the Dead**

And let's face it, even if Heaven or Paradise actually exists, it is not a place where people live but where they simply exist. In the Book of Revelation existence in Heaven is a static state, something like being in a movie theater: one does nothing but enjoy the spectacle of the Lord. The first earth—the mundane world filled with nature's wonders—will have passed away and there will be no more sea (21:1), thus no boating, no fishing, no swimming, no surfing, no more magnificent seascape sunrises and sunsets. The entire purpose of life on earth was so that God could gather the faithful before him on a new earth. Apparently there will be one city, a temple city where the Father and Son will be worshipped, a city made of jasper, sapphire, chalcedony, emerald, pure gold etc. There will be a river of life and a tree that produces twelve kinds of fruit. (22:1-2) There will be no sun or moon. (21:23) I'm sorry but this is not life, not living; it is existing like divinely animated zombies.

What the Quran offers is something like an eternal banquet where men will be “comfortably seated on couches arranged in rows” paired “with beautiful-eyed maidens.” They will eat all the “fruit or meat they desire” and drink from cups a pleasant beverage “that does not lead to idle talk or sin.” And they will be waited on

by “devoted youths.” They will “turn to one another and say, ‘When we were still with our families we used to live in fear—God has been gracious to us and saved us from the torment of intense heat.’” (52:20-28) This is not living either, but existing in epicurean indulgence.

Living is doing and struggling, living is an adventure, accomplishing of goals and projects, getting educated, working, raising a family, exploring, investigating, creating and inventing. There is such a thing as a living death usually associated with the passive indulgences, drug addiction, alcoholism, sex addiction, and other forms of passive intoxication. In his *Odyssey* Homer describes men who no longer live but only exist. They pass the time in a lethargic state of intoxication induced by the lotus plant. The main characteristic of the lotus plant is that it is so delicious or intoxicating that the eater enters into a state of perfect satisfaction and loses the desire or will to do anything else. The afterlife of the Abrahamic religions seems very similar. In the Book of Revelation the intoxicant is the glorious vision of Christianity’s two gods Yahweh and Christ (2 ≠1) and in the Quran the intoxicants are sensual pleasures. These existential states might be pleasurable but they are not living. In Homer the antithesis of the lotus eaters is Odysseus—reluctant warrior, farmer, husband, and father.

And there is no better illustration of living than the life of that restless, wayfaring poet philosopher Matsuo Basho.

### ***On the Nature of Things***

Above I said that had the humanity adopted Basho’s appreciative, non-aggressive approach to living in the mundane world it might have achieved paradise for itself. The same can be said for Epicurus’ approach to living and understanding life. Three centuries before Jesus, about a thousand years before Muhammad, and about two thousand years before Basho, Epicurus offer a way of thinking based on reason and a way of life devoted to minimizing suffering. He is thought of as being an ego-centric philosopher of self-indulgence. Nothing could be further from the truth. His philosophy is based on the notion that all forms of life that can feel seek to live pleurably and avoid pain. Like most Greek philosophers he believed that the ideal life—the happy life—is one that is lived in moderation.

His hedonistic philosophy of life was not purely selfish. He himself devoted his life to helping other people to live in such a way as to avoid causing themselves unnecessary mental and physical pain. Clearly, helping others gave him pleasure.<sup>386</sup> I

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<sup>386</sup> There are people—mostly men—who derive pleasure from harming others. But these people are subhuman, less than or not fully human because they haven’t fully realized their humanity. In a sense, they are below both animals and humans. Animals have no interest in doing harm for its own sake. They are like people who eat meat because it gives them pleasure not because it causes pain to animals (though it does to some degree). The two standout characteristics that define humans are reason and morality. Of the two, morality is

am not claiming that Epicurus' ethical teachings are the most noble. They are self-centered rather than other-centered, but that did not make them selfish in the negative sense. He clearly was offering to everyone a way of life that brought happiness. What Epicurus sought was a salubrious (favorable to health of mind and body) method of living that individuals like himself could adopt. For Epicurus the good life was a happy life and the happy life was pleasant, which required minimizing thoughts and behaviors that cause one suffering. The optimal good life requires tranquility of mind. As an ethicist Epicurus was primarily interested in value, in particular that which is the good life, *summum bonum*, the highest good in life. The highest good he believed was pleasure, but there are all sorts of pleasures, some better than others. Of those, Epicurus believed that what produced tranquility of mind was the highest pleasure.<sup>387</sup>

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the characteristic most associated with being a fully realized human being. Without a doubt, the bar for qualifying as a fully realized human being has been continually raised ever since humans became self-aware critical thinkers.

What about children? They are not subhuman but proto-human, not fully realized. The behavior that clearly throws a person into the subhuman category is intentionally harming another human being or (even harming nonhuman creatures simply to cause them harm). This is an unforgivable violation of another person's autonomy. Thus, subhuman is a moral category. Evil people (especially those who take pleasure from harming others) are subhuman because they are sub-moral. A man who is executed for raping and killing a woman, for example, has been declared subhuman. By committing such a crime he compromised his moral status and by doing so compromised his human status.

Buddha, Socrates, and the historical Jesus were all fully human. Genghis Khan, Stalin, Hitler, lesser evildoers were/are all subhuman. To be fully human one must realize the highest quality of humanity, which is morality, essentially respecting the autonomy of others, which is, as far as I can see, the cardinal principle of morality. In this context, violating a person's autonomy in such a way that causes serious suffering is an unpardonable sin. Once one behaves as a subhuman, he remains subhuman because the past cannot be erased. This means that certain crimes cannot be paid for thus returning a person to fully human status. A murderer is always a murderer. The crime cannot be undone.

<sup>387</sup> There are many pleasures that result in pain, the best known being drugs, alcohol, and careless, permissive sexual behavior. There are even people who enjoy the perverse pleasure of seeing people harmed, such as in movies, viewers who might even identify more with the evildoer than with hero. (Armchair serial killers!) In some cases, the perverse enjoyment could come from seeing people being harmed without oneself being exposed to harm oneself. In this case, seeing others (but not oneself) harmed might result in the viewer more fully appreciating the safety and tranquility of his or her home and community. Or perhaps people need to confront their greatest fears and prefer to do so vicariously. Another attraction may be the desire to see evil people defeated and punished. In video games, the player has the pleasure of being the one who defeats evil. In such cases, the viewer/gamer might even be reassured that he or she could confront and defeat evil.

Epicurus' approach to dealing with pain causing situations was simply to avoid them.



### **The Selfishness of the Abrahamic Religions**

As far as I can see all the Abrahamic religions appeal to their members' selfishness. In the Old Testament the appeal is the Promise Land taken from the Canaanites. Selfishly immoral actions—conquest, carnage, and pillage—are rewarded. Basically, God is an ally in all this. His central role is to be called upon by the Jewish people whenever they are threatened by enemy. What moderates the selfishness expressed in the Old Testament is the tribal concern of the Jewish people for one another. Moses might be a tyrant but he is a tyrant committed to the welfare of his people. When necessary, he will even stand up to God on behalf of his people.

The motivation of the historical Jesus was altruistic. He devoted his life to healing people spiritually, psychologically, and physically. His motivation is not self-aggrandizing conquest. That will come later with Saint Paul and the writers of the Gospels. The historical Jesus came as a prophet, but it's difficult to believe that the God he claimed to represent was the cruelly self-centered Yahweh. The deity he was channeling was transformed by his infinitely more human nature. The mythic Jesus, on the other hand, is a grandiosely narcissistic subjugator who sought not to conquer land and acquire booty but to conquer souls, to exorcise all of humanity so that it would become absolutely subservient to him.

The primary motivation of JudeoChristians is clearly selfish: Christ is their divine Sugar Daddy. And what could be more ego-inflating than standing before the people as God's servant? Whereas traditional Jews were concerned primarily with the welfare of their people, the concern of JudeoChristians primarily with themselves as individuals and their immediate loved ones. They want Jesus to be a friend in this world, a go-to deity when in need. Jesus even offers to cleanse really evil people of their guilt, so they can once again feel good about themselves: "Once a sinner but now I'm saved." But more than anything JudeoChristians want to live forever. They are greedy for everlasting life. Living forever in Heaven is the big prize offered by mythic Jesus Christ, but he also warns that those who do not follow him will end up in the fires of Hell. I have little doubt that the Hell option was added to Heaven as a negative incentive. Thus, JudeoChristianity is all about the self. Its greatest appeal is to the selfishness of the individual. Not only does the JudeoChristian get to live forever but

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Will Durant refers to the Epicurean escape. What he is referring to is the individual who seeks the highest degree of happiness—the tranquil mind—by retreating from the hustle and bustle of the everyday world. In this sense, Epicurus' approach to the happy life is consistent with Eastern philosophy and with Basho's way of life. Today, in the age of pervasive media that brings all the horrors of world into one's home and can make even the most sophisticated user its prisoner, in an age when most of humanity lives in urban environments not congenial to producing mental tranquility, such retreat seems even more necessary and less achievable. And I suspect that Epicurus would advise the person seeking mental tranquility to seek out entertainment that calms the mind, rather than entertainment that agitates, distresses, and disheartens.

is able to boast in this life that he or she serves God, creator of the Universe, and is one of his chosen.

## **The Most Selfish Abrahamic Religion**

### *Avoiding the Fires of Hell*

I find Islam to be the most selfishly motivated of the Abrahamic religions, and I will use the sura titled “Man” to make my point. The sura begins with the common refrain of Allah’s threatening disbelievers with the horrors of Hell: “Lo! We have prepared for disbelievers manacles and iron collars, and a blazing fire.” (76:4) Then comes the reward true believers who “fulfil their vows; they fear a day of widespread woes; they give food to the poor, the orphan, and the captive.” (76:7-8) What the true believers say is revealing: “We feed you for the sake of God alone: we seek neither recompense nor thanks from you.” (76:9) As it turns out, that they refuse expressions of gratitude does not mean their motive is altruistic. It’s not at all; it’s purely selfish. They do it for the lord, they say, because “We fear the Day of our Lord—a woefully grim Day.” (76:10) “So God will save them from the woes of that Day, give them radiance and gladness, and reward them for their steadfastness.” (76:11-12) What we see is that Muhammad adopted the stick and carrot approach of JudeoChristianity.<sup>388</sup> So first of all the big motivation is avoiding the manacles, iron collars, and blazing fire.

### *Seeking the Pleasures of Paradise*

The second motivation is everlasting life of sensual pleasure described as follows:

They will sit on couches, feeling neither scorching heat nor biting cold, with shady branches spread above them and clusters of fruit hanging close at hand. They will be served with silver plates and gleaming silver goblets according to their fancy, and they will be given a drink infused with ginger from a spring called Salsabil. Everlasting youths will attend them—if you could see them,

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<sup>388</sup> Or perhaps from Zoroastrianism, which might have been JudeoChristianity’s source for the notions of Judgment Day and Heaven and Hell. Durant says in his discussion of Zoroastrianism’s concept of Hell, “we hear the threat of that awful Last Judgment which seems to have passed from the Persian to the Jewish eschatology in the days of the Persian ascendancy in Palestine.” He adds, “It was an admirable formula for frightening children into obeying their parents.” (*Our Oriental Heritage* 371) Yet, clearly prophets and priests just as effectively use the threats of Hell to frighten naïve adults into obedience. In the words of Saint Paul the goal of JudeoChristianity is absolute obedience: “We capture people’s thoughts and make them obey Christ. And when you completely obey him, we will punish anyone who refuses to obey.” (2 Corinthians 10:5-6) The ultimate punishment is Hell.

you would think they were scattered pearls—and if you were to look around, you would see bliss and great wealth: they will wear garments of green silk and brocade; they will be adorned with silver bracelets, and their Lord will give them pure drink.” (76:13-21)

“This is your reward” (76:22) concludes the passage. The following sura says that “those who took heed of God” will be told, “Eat and drink to your hearts’ content as a reward for your deeds.” (77:43) The motivation here is clearly selfish: to live forever, to avoid Allah horrific tortures in Hell, and to enjoy an eternity in a garden of delights. All that is required is to “bow down before” God and “glorify him.” (76:26) The last line of the “Man” sura is “He... has prepared a painful torment for the disbelievers.”

### *Booty*

In discussing the origin of Islam Watt considers the rise of Muhammadanism from a materialistic point of view. I would include the acquisition of booting as a material consideration given it is an economic activity. And I would suggest that Muhammadanism took advantage of discrepancy between the haves and the have-nots, between the creators of wealth and the takers of wealth, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The Quran expresses a proto-Marxist ideology:

You do not urge the feeding of the poor... And you love wealth with immense love. (89:18& 20)

He was not believing in God Almighty,  
Nor would he advocate the feeding of the destitute.  
Today he has no friend here. (69:33-35)

About pious, on the other hand,

...in their wealth the beggar and the outcast had due share. (51:19)

What such passages accomplish is to demonize the wealthy and glorify the poor and those who provide for them. Jesus did as much. However, what Muhammadanism does is religiously justify the violent acquisition of wealth from one social group (the creators) by another social group (the takers). It is basically a Robin Hood scenario, in which theft is justified as long as some of the booty is shared with the disadvantage. Initially, in other words, a crude form of Marxism was used to ideologically justify behavior that was already widespread but characterized as outlawry but was legitimized by Muhammad’s religious Marxist ideology.

As a result, Muhammadanism eventually negates, changes, the local (Arab) social environment by inverting the economic social structure. Watt says, “Ideas,

especially religious ones, have an important part to play in the adjustment of a social system to a change in the material environment.” (45) Certainly, Muhammadanism resulted in a reconfiguration of the attitudes toward the traditional players of the society’s economic structure. With Muhammadanism, the taking of wealth was legitimized and glorified above the production of wealth in part by transforming raiding and brigandage into a religious and political crusade.

Thus, we should not overlook what was perhaps the primary mundane motivator of early Islam: the acquisition of booty. Apparently the idea of booty raids or caravan raids came to Muhammad once he left Mecca with his few followers. As I explain above, Muhammad’s *modus operandi* included religiously justified raiding, looting, and confiscation property, which would then be distributed to himself and to his followers. Watt tells us that “the chief feature of the year 623 was the adoption of the practice of organizing razzias [raids] against Meccan caravans.” (103) This is just a year after the Hijra, when Muhammad and his followers abandoned Mecca to settle in Medina. This resulted in “Muhammad’s metamorphosis from a preacher to a political and military leader.” (*Wikiislam*, “Timeline of Muhammad”) So after ten years or more of unsuccessfully preaching to the Meccans, “Muhammad had *few* [my italics] followers.” Thus, “Force became an option for Muslims only after their arrival in Medina.” (Peters 184)

At this point, Islam becomes a religion of raiding, looting, and conquest. As usual Muhammad justifies the use of force by claiming it was allowed by Allah: “Permission to take up arms is given to those against whom war is made, because they have been wronged and Allah, indeed, has power to help them.” (22:39) So it seems that not only Muhammad but Muhammadanism also underwent a metamorphosis. It became a religion devoted to raiding, looting, and confiscation of property. It’s almost as if someone told Muhammad about the Book of Joshua that describes God’s commission to Joshua to take possession of Canaan and all its wealth. But, of course, that wasn’t necessary because the Arabs already had a tradition of raiding and looting. All Muhammad had to do was incorporate that tradition into Islam. Guillaume says that “trading as much as raiding formed the basis of their social and economic life... As we shall see, trading was the Prophet Muhammad’s first occupation, and the end of his life was occupied with raids.” (4) Thus, it could very well be claimed that, as with the ancient Jews, the economics of conquest became the religion’s real motivating force.

The reason for the shift? To attract followers. The fate of the Jewish tribe the Banu Nadir illustrates the kind of payoff Muhammad’s followers could expect. The Banu Nadir was located in the neighborhood of Medina. They “were forced to lay down their arms and evacuate their settlements. Valuable land and much booty fell into the hands of the Muslims.” (Guillaume 46) In addition, Peters tells us that “a string of military victories rapidly made the new believers rich from booty rather than local trade.” (198) Such conquests would continue and grow larger in scale until, “In

size and population it [Muslim Empire] was broadly similar to the Roman Empire at its height in the eighth century.” (Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests* 363) Guillaume says it was “an age when war was a pastime and a means of gaining loot...” (45) I would argue that regardless of the kind of society Islam would eventually settle into, during its formative period, the defining feature of Islam was economically motivated aggression that materially benefitted Muhammad and his booty-seeking followers.

In conclusion, Islam is essentially a religion characterized by both divine and human selfishness. God selfishly demands that humans worship and glorify him. From God’s perspective that is the *raison d’être* of human existence; from the human perspective the goal in life is not to serve humanity but to serve oneself by serving God and conquering and exploiting infidels. Any good deeds that might have occurred were not altruistically motivated but simply the price of admission to Paradise.<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>389</sup> Helping widows, orphans, the poor, captives, and others in need is simply moral garnish to give a religion that exhibits selfishness at every turn the appearance of being moral or being about behaving morally. The following passage from the Quran reveals the moral sensibility of Muhammad’s followers: “And of them [Muhammad’s followers] there are those who blame you with respect to the alms; if they are given a share, they are pleased; if they are not given a share, lo! they are full of rage.” (9:58) Guillaume says that “among the objects of almsgiving is the ‘gaining of men’s hearts.’” (51) Revealed here is the political use of a moral principle and loyalty’s materialistic (rather than moral) incentive.

And in reference to the Quran’s altruistic demands, Watt says, “These are, of course, good and sound injunctions, but what is surprising and puzzling is that this is the only aspect of conduct that is mentioned (apart from worship of God and belief in him). There is nothing about respect for life, property, parents and marriage or the avoiding false witness.” (33) Clearly, certain of these moral principles would have been contrary to the Muhammad’s Islamic agenda. Neither Islam, Allah, nor Muhammad respects the life and property of disbelievers. The Quran says, “Believers never ally themselves with the disbelievers, instead of the believers. Whoever does this is exiled from GOD.” (3:28) This includes friends and family members: “O you who believe, do not ally yourselves even with your parents and your siblings, if they prefer disbelieving over believing. Those among you who ally themselves with them are wrongdoers.” (9:23) In the context of Muhammadanism the moral discrepancy and deficiency are not surprising, but coming from God (Allah) they are inexcusable.

Allah himself will condemn to the fires of hell widows, orphans, the poor, and captives who are disbelievers. Personally, I can see no moral justification for torturing people for rejecting as false or doubtful claims of any kind—true or false. Allah is especially annoyed when someone calls Muhammad’s revelations “Ancient fables.” (83:13) They have no reason for believing otherwise. They are for the most part *ancient* fables adopted from the ancient Jews—stories about Moses, Noah, Abraham, etc. (Which are today considered unhistorical legends. See, for example, *The Bible Unearthed*, written by two archaeologists who will burn in Hell for their disbelieving science. Actually, that book is itself a revelation.)

The revelations, furthermore, are not being delivered by God but by a man, who

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himself can't claim to know God since the revelations were supposedly delivered to him by an angel. What the disbelievers are expressing is doubt that is clearly justified. For that they will burn in Hell. Such punishment is underserved thus immoral.

In the sura that condemns Muhammad's revelations being called ancient fables, the reader learns that cheaters will also be sent to burn in Hell. Right away comes to mind shady used car dealers. A man once knowingly sold my mother a car that had had the odometer turned back. He even knew my mother. Let's assume that he engaged often in such trickery. Would such a man deserve to burn an eternity in the fire of Hell? No. And to punish him in such a way would be unjust and cruelly immoral. Muhammad tells the reader that in life the disbelieving cheaters laugh at believers, but in the afterlife "believers are laughing at the [burning] disbelievers as they [believers] sit on couches, gazing around." (83:29 & 34-35) Allah's punishment makes a mockery of morality and justice, and his elect behave as cruel sadists.

But, actually, sura about cheaters is not about punishing cheaters. It's about punishing disbelievers. Cheaters are not sent to Hell because they are cheaters but because they do not believe in the resurrection and Day of Judgment. Cheaters who accept as true Muhammad's revelations and surrender their lives to daily praising Allah will be excused from the fires of Hell. A more extreme case of Allah's moral hypocrisy is describe in sura eighty-five, which describes the damning of disbelievers who made a fiery trench in which to burn believers, who were apparently Muslims:

They ignited a blazing fire. Then sat around it. To watch the burning of the believers. To Him belongs the kingship of the heavens and the earth. And GOD witnesses all things. Surely, those who persecute the believing men and women, then fail to repent, have incurred the retribution of Gehenna [Hell]; they have incurred the retribution of burning. (85:5-10)

A moral inconsistency seems to be lurking here. Allah says, via the angel, via Muhammad, that the disbelievers' only grievance against the believing Muslims was their faith in God (Allah) and for that the believers were burned in a pit. Yet, the punishment for the cruel disbelievers will be to burn in Hell. So, it seems that Allah is punishing these religiously intolerant malefactors for doing exactly what he does: burning people who disagree with his religious beliefs, more precisely his religious beliefs according to Muhammad. Actually, Allah is far crueler. The victims of the religious persecutors died in the fire, thus their suffering came to an end. That is not the case with those Allah punishes. They burn and burn and burn.

There is more. *The Study Quran* says the most frequently cited account of the origin of this incident is the story of a king who is angry at believers who place God above him. He demands that the believers give up their religion or be thrown into a fiery pit. Historically, the believers were most likely Christians, not Muslims. That would make the Quran's suggestion that Mohammad's Muslims were persecuted in this cruel manner fallacious. Interestingly, the editor says that the verses "present a universal condemnation of all who persecute believers of any faith." (1497) If that is true, then Islam doesn't practice what it preaches.

The real revelation of the Quran is that nonbelievers have no moral rights. That's

## **Philosophical Psychotherapy**

Epicurus was as much a self-help psychotherapist as he was a philosopher. Like the historical Jesus he was not concerned with saving humanity (the intent of the mythical Jesus) but with saving individuals who, for whatever reason, suffered physically and psychologically. Both men emphasized the individual taking control of his or her life, and both men explained how this could be done. The key difference between the two approaches is found in how they viewed the self. For Epicurus the self is always kept in focus. The concern for the Epicurean is determining which actions will cause oneself pleasure or pain.<sup>390</sup> For Jesus, happiness was achieved by realizing the moral self through altruistic actions. The Good Samaritan was not only a good man but a happy man. I suppose what occurs is realizing the moral (highest) self by transcending self-concern. Epicurus' path to happiness was living prudently, which meant carefully considering the consequences of one's actions for oneself. Jesus path was basically to act on the behalf of others, which is the life he chose for himself.

The goals of both men are quite different from that of the god of the Abrahamic religions. Yahweh/Allah is not interested in improving the lives of human beings but making them his worshiping servants. In the Quran there are a few demands for better treatment of women and the poor,<sup>391</sup> but these are hardly revolutionary measures designed to improve the human condition. Muhammad's primary goal was to convert humanity by word and sword into Allah's subjects. Given that the essence of his message from Allah is that nonbelievers will be inflicted with "spiraling torment," thrown into a "scorching Fire" that "spares nothing and leaves nothing," that "scorches the flesh" (74:17-29), the unavoidable conclusion is that Muhammad's concern was not to lessen human suffering in the here and now. To the contrary, he dramatically increased suffering via his religious conquests, the continuing conquests of his inspired followers, and the spread of his psychologically terrifying religious ideology.<sup>392</sup>

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because the Quran, thus Islam, is really all about the glorification of a selfish, narcissistic deity, not morality. Neither Allah nor Yahweh can serve as moral authorities. They must recuse themselves as such for their inability, due to their narcissism, to consider moral questions objectively.

<sup>390</sup> Consequentialist egoism—it looks bad, and can be, but one must also consider that doing good (altruism) can make one feel good (by enhancing one's ego ideal) and causing harm can cause one suffering, such as in the form of a guilty conscience (tarnishing one's ego ideal).

<sup>391</sup> And I suspect that the *modus operandi* Muhammad used to gain adherents was similar to that of the promoters of JudeoChristianity and Marxist ideology—to appeal to the proletariat masses by arguing that the theology (or ideology) is especially concerned about their welfare.

<sup>392</sup> One is tempted to absolve Muhammad from condemnation since he was just a

Allah's threats of fiery punishment recall Lucretius' discussion of Agamemnon sacrificing his daughter by immolation. Poor Iphigenia is struck dumb with dread and sinks to her knees in fear (*On the Nature of Things*, all quotations are from are from Martin Smith's translation, 5). And then there is Abraham who proceeds to sacrifice his son Isaac at God's request. Not only does religion inspire terror in the hearts of humans, it inspires acts of terror.

## Lucretius

Since only a few fragments and letters of Epicurus works remain, I've chosen Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things* to serve as Epicurean scripture. Like his mentor, Lucretius was primarily concerned with how human beings cause themselves unnecessary suffering. He believed the great source of suffering is wrongful thinking (a central theme of Buddhism), which itself causes suffering but also causes behaviors that cause suffering. The type of wrongful thinking he believed to be the most egregiously harmful is superstition, which has resulted in humans "groveling ignominiously in the dust, crushed beneath the grinding weight of superstition, which from the celestial regions displayed its face, lowering over mortals with hideous scowls." (Martin Smith translation, 4) Certainly, the "hideous scowls" does fit Yahweh and Allah, but Lucretius was referring to the fictional deities of Greek mythology. Lucretius believed that Epicurus was the first to challenge the tyranny of superstition.<sup>393</sup>

Apparently Lucretius believed in the gods but the real gods lived in a kind of never-never land in a state of tranquility, which understandably required that they remain uninvolved in human affairs. His view of deity seems more consistent with what one would logically expect of divine beings. However, I suspect that they also serve as role models for how humans should try to live—immune from the excesses that plague humanity. Lucretius believed that his mentor Epicurus and his followers achieved that divine way of life.

## Superstition as a Mental Disease

Superstition was for Lucretius a disease of the mind, a "terrifying darkness that enshrouds the mind" that must "be dispelled" "by study of the superficial aspect and underlying principle of nature" (Smith 7), in other words, by empirical observation. What was being offered was a methodology for gaining knowledge that

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messenger, a servant carrying out Allah's orders. Or was Muhammad's Judaized version of Allah simply a tool that served his will to power? Religion has always served the will-to-power interests of individuals and institutions.

<sup>393</sup> A few centuries before Epicurus, the original writer of the story of Job challenged God on the moral grounds that he whimsically and unjustly played with humans. Epicurus would have argued that Yahweh was a fiction. That nicely solves the problem raised in the Book of Job. God cannot behave immorally if he doesn't exist.



would prove itself to be the only reliable method for learning about and understanding nature and the workings of the mundane world—a prototype of the scientific method. It is also a method of understanding the world that has immensely improved the living conditions of that part of humanity that has adopted it. The goal of science is to know through observation and logic what actually exist—the forces and stuff that actually make up humans and the world they live in. Superstition, on the other hand, invents endless phantoms that clutter the mind, thus have obfuscated and retarded humanity’s understanding of the workings of the world.

I’ve already used the example of how superstition prevented for thousands of years the disease of epilepsy from being investigated in a beneficial manner, that is, in a manner based on observation and empirical explanation. *Wikipedia* says that the oldest account of an epileptic seizure was written four thousand years ago and says, “The person described in the text was diagnosed as being under the influence of a Moon god, and underwent an exorcism.” *Wikipedia* says further that “In the fifth century BC, [the Greek physician] Hippocrates rejected the idea that the disease was caused by spirits. In his landmark work *On the Sacred Disease*, he proposed that epilepsy was not divine in origin and instead was a medically treatable problem originating in the brain” (“Epilepsy”).

Because of the Abrahamic religions’ belief that epileptic seizures are caused by supernatural beings, progress in treating the disease would have to wait about twenty-three centuries after Hippocrates correctly diagnosed its cause. Epicureanism was one of the earliest advocates of using empirical investigation to understand natural phenomena because there really is no supernatural phenomena given the gods themselves were considered material beings (super men and women). In addition, Epicureans believed that nature operates according to materialistic principles.

### **Satan’s Touch**

The Quran mentions “someone tormented by Satan’s touch” (2:275), apparently referring to one of the supernatural causes of epilepsy. The Islamic Satan, Iblis, is a jinni, a spirit made from smokeless fire. I bring this up because this view of epilepsy illustrates how the multitudes of invisible spirit beings are detected: by the phenomena they cause in the empirical world. The rhetorical strategy goes like this. First there is the claim that the mundane world is populated by billions of spirit beings that are in themselves empirically unknowable. So how do we know they exist? By claiming a causal relationship between imperceptible spirit beings and perceptible phenomena such as epilepsy.

We are familiar with this way of thinking in polytheism, which attributes divine causes to natural phenomena such as lightning, thunder, and rainbows. By assuming that a divinity causes a natural phenomenon, one logically must assume the existence of that divinity. The Abrahamic religious do pretty much the same thing when they claim that Yahweh/Allah are the creators of everything in nature and even

are the ultimate controllers of what goes on in the mundane world. However, as with epilepsy, science has provided empirical explanations for natural phenomena, making supernatural explanations unnecessary and doubtful, especially given that supernatural entities/causes remain in themselves undetectable.

### **Billions of Unknowables**

The Abrahamic religions claims there are billions of angels and other spiritual beings all around us. The Quran/Allah says,

It makes no difference whether any of you speak secretly or aloud, whether you are hiding under cover of night or walking about in the day; each person has guardian angels before him and behind, watching over him by God's command. (13:10-11)

Given the context of the passage, it seems that these angels serve as God's informants rather than human protectors. Another sura says, "Over you stand watchers, noble recorders who know what you do." On Judgment Day they will report, sending the good to "live in bliss" and the wicked to burn in Hell. (82:10-13) From what *Wikipedia* says, these are two additional angels, one on the left, one on the right ("Kiramān Katibīn"). This situation sounds to me very totalitarian, each person being followed by two to four angels, and becomes a reality when humans play the role of informants within the religious community.

Getting back to the point I want to make, there are seven billion people on the planet, each with two to four guardian/watcher angels. And there are billions more of jinn (made from smokeless fire by Allah), but mythically convenient these creatures are either invisible to humans, appearing only in animal or human form; thus, they are in themselves indescribable but are still assumed to exist. Given that the number of supernatural beings far exceeds the number of humans, one would think there would be some empirical indication of their presence, but there never is. It's not surprising that disbelievers have had so much trouble believing such religious claims. And isn't it unjust to punish them for not taking some prophet's word that people are part of an elaborate divine fantasy that they have no evidence for other than the prophet's saying so?

### **Mental/Intellectual Salvation**

Lucretius takes it as his mission in life to "endeavor to disentangle the mind from the strangling knots of superstition." (28) His reasons are basically two. First, superstition prevents a clear understanding of the world, which certainly prevents effective interaction with the world—such as finding cures for disease. Second, and no less important, is that superstitions terrify people and inspire them to commit horrible acts. To illustrate how superstition can inspire horrific deeds, he uses

Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia to the goddess Artemis for his having killed a deer in a sacred grove (men again not respecting limits). Poor Iphigenia is struck dumb with fear, tears streaming down her cheeks (5). Though it is believed that Artemis rescues the girl, deity to the rescue never happens in real life, such as when Joan of Arc was sacrificed to God or to the Church. And the story of Abraham legitimizes murder in the name of God. It makes no difference that Yahweh calls off the murder of Isaac. The point is that if he hadn't called it off, the murder would have been divinely justified. Lucretius had no idea how bad things could get with religion since JudeoChristianity and JudeoIslam had not yet arrived. After their arrival millions of people would be persecuted, tortured, and murdered on behalf of God.

It's understandable that people would be terrified by the belief they are being followed by spying angels whose evidence will condemn them to the fires of Hell where they will endure "tremendous," "terrible," "painful," "agonizing," "shameful," "torment," just because they couldn't believe Muhammad's message or because they believed that God had a son or a daughter or because they belonged to another religion or simply could not make the leap of faith to any religion. It's truly ironic that atheists and true believers of other faiths will both be sent to Hell. The inept psychology of the Abrahamic faiths is the failure to realize that believing is not simply a matter of will, or if it becomes a matter of will it is pathological.<sup>394</sup> If I believe there is a tomato on my desk because there really is, that is a healthy belief because it is not a matter of will but of empirical observation.\* However, if I will myself to believe my room is full of invisible tomatoes, that is not a healthy belief. One problem with this approach to belief is that a person could, theoretically, will himself or herself into believing anything, such as a person's believing his or her room is full of supernatural creatures spying on him or her on the behalf of a greater

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<sup>394</sup> I can choose to open a door, but I can't simply choose to like or love someone. I can choose to be nice to someone, but I can't choose to believe that I should marry a person I know nothing about. The difference is between choosing to act in some way versus to feel or think in some way. The latter isn't simply a matter of choice. A person can know that flying is safer than driving by looking at statistics. But a person cannot make himself or herself feel safer when flying than when driving. It's not a matter of decision. By looking at statistics a person can come believe flying is generally a safe form of travel, though they may continue to feel unsafe in an airplane. And certainly people cannot simply decide to believe that they have a guardian angel looking out for them or that a St. Christopher medal will protect them when traveling. And it is wrong to condemn people for not being able to make a leap of faith they don't believe in. To force them to do so—by torturing or terrorizing them, for example—doesn't result in their making a decision but corrupts the decision-making process so that the person is no long acting rationally but irrationally. As far as I can see, it induces a form of insanity by breaking a person's will, by destroying their integrity as rational human beings.

supernatural Big Brother spirit. It's odd that the one belief (in invisible tomatoes) would be considered insane but the other (in spying angels) isn't.

\*The belief here is really a case of knowing. Knowing occurs when (1) what is claimed to be known can be empirically experienced and (2) and that experience is available to anyone. More precisely, the experience is unavoidable. So, I know a tomato is on my desk because I *see* it there and any person who enters the room can also see it there (under normal conditions, cannot avoid seeing it there). In other words, the tomato's existence is public knowledge, not private belief. That doesn't work for ghosts or angels. They cannot be experienced empirically nor can they be experienced by just anyone. That's because they are not experiential objects. They are objects of belief.

Important here is that verification of the belief claim comes not from the object itself but from the believer. It's a matter of conviction, not empirical experience. My claim that the tomato is on my desk is based on the observable presence of the tomato—not on what I think or believe. On the other hand, the claim that there are angels in my room is not based on my experience or observation of angels but only on my conviction that they are there.

## Two Contrary Descriptions of Origins

Both the Book of Genesis and the Quran claim God created all the entities and inhabitants of the world. The descriptions provided by both scriptures give the impression being explanatory but are in fact simply declarations of God's creation of various entities. There is no genuine description or explanation. The entire process is enveloped in mystery, which to religion is a virtue, but to intellectual and practical understanding mystery is a useless obfuscation. The Quran asks, "Have you ever wondered how God created seven heavens, one above the other, placed the moon as a light in them and the sun as a lamp...?" (71:15-17) The dictionary says the seventh heaven is the farthest of the concentric spheres containing the stars and constituting the dwelling place of God and the angels. However, modern science reveals there are not multiple heavens "one above the other" and though capable of viewing distant galaxies, has never seen the dwelling place of God and the angels, but of course couldn't anyway because they are invisible.

Such statements are in fact incomprehensible if one tries to imagine how the events actually occurred. The worst would be to imagine God placing the moon and sun in the sky in the way a person would hang ornaments on a Christmas tree. Empirically, neither the moon nor the sun was "placed." They evolved into existence from solar dust and/or debris, and as Lucretius says, this was very much a haphazard process, not an act of intelligence (149):

From time everlasting countless elements of things [atoms and molecules], impelled by blows and by their own weight, have never ceased to move in manifold ways, making all kinds of unions and experimenting with everything they could combine to create; and that is why, after wandering far and wide during mighty ages of eternity [14 billion years] and experiencing every kind

of movement and combination, at last those atoms have met which, then suddenly dashed together, often form the foundations of mighty fabrics—earth, sea, and sky, and the family of living creatures. (149)

What Lucretius provides is an evolutionary theory of the emergence of the Universe over time. About the formation of the earth he doesn't simply say the earth just happened and certainly not that it was hung in the solar system by a deity. He tries to explain empirically how the earth came about. He says that "the particles of earth, by reason of their weight and intertangement, congregated in the middle and occupied the lowest positions; and the more closely they became united and intertangled. (149) He had no concept of gravity, so he relied on the notions of weight and intertangement. He also got wrong the placement of the earth, relying on the geocentric theory of the earth, which is consistent with empirical observation, but wrong, nonetheless.

But unlike the dogmatism that characterizes the Bible and the Quran, Lucretius is aware that many of his views are hypotheses. He uses phrases such as "alternatively it is possible," "a possible explanation," "it may be that," "it is difficult to determine with certainty," and "to assert dogmatically... does not befit one proceeding with cautious steps." How refreshingly different from the harsh, authoritarianism of the Abrahamic scriptures, in particular the Allah's absolute intolerance of doubt and uncertainty. And Lucretius could be quite considerate of philosophers he disagreed with. He most strongly disagrees with the Stoics, who thought of the Universe as a spirit infused organism. In Greek fashion they also thought the world to be more orderly than it is. Still, the guiding spirit of the Universe was not an anthropomorphic deity but a cosmic mind or universal reason (*logos*). The error isn't awful—*logos* could be considered the combination of natural laws. The earth is certainly an orderly place, at least for the time being.

Lucretius, however, was a materialistic purist who rightfully understood that the world is plague with many imperfections that make ludicrous the notion that a rational, benevolent deity is in charge, which was the view of the Stoics. The Stoics also thought the ultimate stuff of the Universe was fire, which isn't too far from the truth if fire can be interpreted as energy. Lucretius used his strongest negative language for the Stoics, calling them fools (*stolidi/stoics*), which, according to Smith, was most likely a matter of verbal playfulness. (20) However, given his concern for human suffering, I doubt very much that Lucretius would want his Stoic opponents burned in Hell.

Lucretius' attitude toward other thinkers is express in the following statement about Empedocles:

He and those very markedly inferior and far less important theorists whom I mentioned above made many fine and inspired discoveries and from the

innermost shrine of their hearts delivered oracles more holy and much more reliable than those that Pythia [priestess of Apollo] pronounced from the tripod and bay of Phoebus. (23)

How different the tone of this passage from the condemnations made by Yahweh and Allah toward believers of different religions. Lucretius felt a comradery with other scientists/philosophers even if they didn't always agree. They were all on shared mission, which was to find the truth, whereas the Abrahamic religions dogmatically announce the truth and condemn to destruction those who hold different perspectives of the truth.

Lucretius wrongly claimed that terrestrial animals did not emerge from the seas, but he was correct in say that "the earth experimented with the creation of many prodigious things, which were born with bodies of grotesque appearance." (159) Science has explained how the earth has been a hot house of experimental creation. We know that plants and animal were not created all at once at God's command. Lucretius says that every species survives "from the beginning of its existence either by cunning or by courage or by speed," and those that lacked those qualities "nature brought their species to extinction." (160) About humans he says they began by living "random-roving lives like wild beasts. No sturdy farmer guided the curved plow; no one knew how to work the fields with iron implements or plant young saplings in the earth." (162) But over time the skills required to build civilizations "were gradually taught by experience and the inventiveness of the energetic mind, as humanity progressed step by step." (176) All the accomplishments of civilization were not given to humanity by God but earned by humanity through sweat, toil, and ingenuity.

About the origin of the gods, Lucretius says that humans "observed the orderly movements of the heavenly bodies and regular return of the seasons of the year without being able to account for these phenomena. Therefore they took refuge in ascribing everything to the gods and in supposing that everything happens in obedience to their will. And they located the habitations and sacred quarters of the gods in the sky." (169) The Quran says, "Control of the heavens and earth belong to God." (24:42)

About the working of nature, most of Lucretius' explanations are incorrect, but his method of empirical observation and explanation was correct. His mistakes were the result of lacking the observational tools of modern science and relying too much on atomic theory. The Quran says "God drives the clouds, then gathers them together and piles them up until you see rain pour from their midst." (24:42) Lucretius says, "As for the formation of clouds, this results from the sudden coalescence of numerous particles flying about in the spacious sky..." "Multitudinous particles are raised by nature from the whole surface of the sea, as is shown by the way in which garments, hung up on the shore, absorb clinging moisture." "Similarly moisture is raised to the clouds from every river." Finally, "when multitudinous particles of water

have come together... the crammed clouds hasten to discharge their moisture.” (190-191) How much more informative—and closer to the truth—is Lucretius’ explanation, one that can be corrected and modified with more precise observation.

God has nothing to do with the processes of cloud formation and rain or any of the other natural process he’s given credit for, and to claim that he creates clouds and rain requires a leap of the imagination. Acceptance of such a view is a matter of passive, uncritical acquiescence. God is even given credit for human accomplishments. The Quran says, “livestock—He created them too.” (16:5) The truth is humans domesticated and trained animals over a period of many centuries. Allah also says, “It is He who sends down water for you from the sky... With it He grows for you grain, olives, palms, vines, and all kinds of other crops.” (16:10-11) Again it was humans who domesticated wild plants and animals, a process that began during the Mesolithic era about 9000 years ago.

### **What Lucretius Got Right**

Most of Lucretius’ scientific explanations are incorrect, but what he does get right is amazing. The reason why so many of his explanation are incorrect is that his observations are limited to data that he senses can provide without the aid of technology. Eyeglasses would not be invented for another twelve centuries. Lucretius assumed the sun is the size it appears to be. There was no way he could know that the sun is 149,600,000 kilometers from earth. And even today, people believe they see the sun moving across the sky, when in fact it is stationary. The importance of Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things* is its approach to understanding the world. The book makes clear that philosophers/scientists make mistakes on the way as they attempt to intellectually explain the endless phenomena of the mundane world.<sup>395</sup> It

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<sup>395</sup> How strange that so much of humanity’s time and energy has been devoted and continues to be devoted to investigating imaginary events of imaginary beings that the Abrahamic religions claim took place ages ago. The three religions are always about the activities of fantastic supernatural entities that occurred in ancient times, never about what they are doing today. Why is it that this complex supernatural universe is never available in the present for investigation, in the way the mundane world is? It’s because the supernatural universe is imaginary.

But superstition has its advantages, one of which it takes very little effort or intellectual sophistication to understand. Let’s face it, the Abrahamic religions consists of stories, not subjects to be investigated such as those identified and investigated by Aristotle: botany, biology, logic, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, cosmology, physics, the history of philosophy, metaphysics, psychology, ethics, theology, rhetoric, political history, government and political theory, rhetoric, and the arts. Interestingly, religion/superstition was not a topic of interest for Aristotle.\*

Initially, Aristotle inherited some of his teacher’s (Plato) attraction to theological speculation but grew away from such thinking as he became increasingly interested in doing science. His what John Randall says his book *Aristotle* about Aristotle’s theology that that was used by Judaism,

also makes clear that it is a collective endeavor involving intellectually trained scientists, mathematicians, philosophers, and other specialists in the various investigative disciplines. It has been and is a great journey. In the West it began with the Pre-Socratic scientists and philosophers and continues today, especially in the theoretical sciences. With the Abrahamic religions there is no intellectual journey because the truth is not to be discovered in the mundane world of nature and humanity but declared in scripture, and it's all about a god who declares that "his" being adored above all else is the purpose of the Universe and human existence. Humans who disagree are—by definition given the divine purpose of the Universe—worthless and will be tortured in Hell.

### **Waiting for the Day of Validation**

The big theory Lucretius celebrates—atomism—originated with neither him nor his mentor Epicurus, but with the Greek philosopher scientist Democritus (460–370 B.C.). The Jews wait for the Day of the Lord, when "the sun will turn dark,

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JudeoChristianity and JudeoIslam to provide philosophical support for their theologies:

But this theology of the Unmoved Mover, the expression of Aristotle's early Platonistic faith, was gradually pushed into the background. (108) ... That is, the Unmoved Mover is not to be identified with 'God' in any Moslem, Jewish, or Christian sense: it has nothing to do with the God of Moses and the Prophets, or with the God of Jesus or of the Church—to say nothing of the God of Mohammed. It is not the 'creator' of anything, for the world is eternal and motion and time are eternal. It is not even the eternal "sustainer" of the world, in a Neoplatonic sense: for to Aristotle, the world does not need to be sustained, it needs rather to be explained and understood. The Unmoved Mover exercises no providence, it has no "will" and no "purpose." It does not "know" the world: it does not "know" anything. It is not "intelligent," as man has the power of intelligence; it does not "think," as man can be said to think at times. It can be called *nous* or intellect only in the sense in which Spinoza's Order of Nature or Substance can be said to be "intellect." ... It is an intelligible structure or order, a principle of intelligibility. Hence Avicenna [Muslim philosopher], Maimonides [Jewish philosopher], Thomas Aquinas [Christian philosopher], and the rest, in identifying the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle with the "God" of the religious traditions, were, like all rational or natural theologians, indulging in double talk. (136)

One needs no education in such intellectual disciplines. One need not be a rocket scientist to be a Jew, Christian, or Muslim. One need not even be literate. All a Jew needs is the Old Testament; the Christian, the New Testament; the Muslims, the Quran. One book each. And for the nonreader the information can be conveyed by a rabbi, priest, or imam. One can remain totally ignorant of history, science, philosophy, social sciences, the arts, etc., and yet believe one knows all that one needs to know about the world, believe that one truly understands what the Universe is all about: the salvation of humanity through the glorification of God. An understanding of the world based on superstition is easy.



and the moon will be as red as blood before that great and terrible day” (Joel 2:31) when the Lord will appear to take vengeance upon the enemies of the Jews. And JudeoChristians wait for Christ to return “as a thief coming at night...” when “People will think they are safe and secure... but destruction will suddenly strike them like the pains of a woman about to give birth.” (1 Thessalonians 5:2- 3) And JudeoMuslims wait for that Day of Judgment that “will fall on the disbelievers,” a day “whose length is fifty thousand years,” a day that “disbelievers think... is distant,” a day “when the heavens will be like molten brass... when no friend will ask about his friend,” when those “who rejects the truth” will be claimed by “a raging flame that strips away the skin.” (70:4-16) They all continue to wait, but Lucretius’ beloved atomic theory finally experienced its second coming (the first being Democritus’ revelation) during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when it was finally verified.

### **Brownian Motion**

One of the important verifying observations was made by botanist Robert Brown. When observing through a microscope grains of pollen suspended in water, he saw the grains moving about in zigzag motion. Brown couldn’t explain the motion, but a few decades later Albert Einstein would. The cause was water molecules. What Brown describes, Lucretius describes two millennia earlier in *On the Nature of Things*:

A further reason why you should devote particular attention to these particles that are seen to be in commotion in the sun’s rays is that such commotion also implies the existence of movements of matter that are secret and imperceptible. *For you will observe* many of those particles, under the impulse of unseen blows, changing course and being forcibly turned back, now this way, now that way, in every direction. It is evident that they all derive this random movement from the atoms. (Smith 38; Lucretius bk 2;124-132)

It’s a remarkable observation, one made with the naked eye, at that. What Lucretius does is verify Democritus’ theory by observation. A central principle of Lucretius’ worldview is that if people want to understand the world they live in, then they need to observe its goings on.

But the age of JudeoChristianity was about to begin and it would eventually destroy the intellectual curiosity about the world people actually live in. The focus would be on the imagined rather than on the observed, on the unobservable supernatural rather than on the observable natural. The most influential Church father after Saint Paul, who himself had no interest in this world and was impatient to be done with it, is Saint Augustine. In his *A History of Scientific Ideas* Charles Singer tells us,

Through St. Augustine, above all men, early Christianity acquired its distaste for a consideration of phenomena. “Go not out of doors,” said the great Father of the Church. “Return into thyself. In the inner man dwells truth.” For a thousand years men responsible for the thought of the Western world did not go out of doors. (134)

“Return into thyself” means relying on the imagination rather than on observation. I assume this means something like introspection, which relies a good deal on past behaviors, experiences, and acquired notions, in Augustine’s case, rhetoric, Manichaeism, a corrupted form of Platonism, Neoplatonism, and JudeoChristian theology. With that mix of data, he closed himself off from the world and pontificated on the reality of existence. His approach to understanding nature and humanity was not an investigative but dogmatic. The dogma was based religious myth—including Neoplatonism—and his own limited personal and worldly experience. Saint Augustine locked himself in a room which was his self, and the Church did the same thing. Both closed themselves off from the world.

This is so different from Lucretius’ approach, which was to open himself to the world in order to better understand it. He was a careful observer, but he was not a systematic, investigative scientist in the way Aristotle was. But he relied on the various experiences and ideas of other thinkers who were professional investigators. And as it would turn out, his general notion of how the world works would be verified, notions such as atomic theory, the formation of heavenly bodies; the evolution of the universe, life on earth, and human culture; and the origin of the belief in the gods and religion. Most importantly, his approach to acquire knowledge and gaining understand was correct and would prove infinitely more productive of knowledge and understanding than the scriptures of the Abrahamic religions. As I said before, most of Lucretius’ explanations of the workings of nature were incorrect, but his empirical method of observation (observing the world rather than relying on religions myths to explain it) would eventually lead to science replacing all his incorrect explanations with correct ones.

### **Faith or Reason, Imagination or Observation**

Lucretius died a half century before the birth of Jesus and the religion associated with him were born. At this historical moment two incompatible approaches understanding life would be offered. Jesus represented Judaic supernaturalism and Lucretius represented the philosophical/scientific tradition of the Greeks. The one consisted of prophets, the other of scientist philosophers.<sup>396</sup> The

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<sup>396</sup> And we should keep in mind that for many of the big names of the Old Testament—such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses—there is no evidence whatsoever of their having existed other than as fictional Biblical characters. On the other hand, the existence of the big players in Greek philosophy/science—such as the Presocratics, Socrates,

prophets relied on revelation for their information. The scientist philosophers relied on logical-empirical reason. The ultimate concern of the prophets was God. They had no interest whatsoever in understanding the nature of the mundane world for itself. They already knew what the mundane was all about—its teleology or purpose.

The three Abrahamic scriptures state clearly the purpose of the Universe, but I will allow the Quran speak for the entire Abrahamic tradition. In the Quran the angel Gabriel says, “He [God] created the heavens and earth for a true purpose.” (39:5) Later, God declares that purpose: “I created jinn [spirits that take on human and animal form] and mankind only to worship Me.” (51:56) That’s the purpose of the Universe in an Abrahamic nutshell. The Universe itself is God’s magic trick performed to impress humans. As the Exodus story of Moses and the Pharaoh reveals, God loves to show off.

The Greek philosophers were mostly interested in the mundane world, not God<sup>397</sup>—at least not until Murray’s “failure of nerve” occurs and philosophy ceases to be philosophy and becomes theology, as in the case of Neoplatonism and later Stoicism. According to Epicureanism the Universe has no purpose. It exists, and that’s all. This view is consistent with that of science. Still, it is a magical kingdom filled with an infinite number of the most beautiful and sublime mysteries to be explored. If I were to give the Universe a purpose, it would be to explore though creative generation all the possibilities of being. In a sense, the Universe makes the statement “This is what there is when there is something rather than nothing.” Of course, the generative stuff is atoms (helped along by forces unknown to Lucretius). About the magical procreative matrix Lucretius says,

Certainly the primary elements did not intentionally and with acute intelligence dispose themselves in their respective positions, nor did they covenant to produce their respective motions. In reality, from time everlasting

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Plato, Aristotle, Lucretius, Zeno, Pythagoras, Euclid, Archimedes, Hippocrates, etc.—is undeniable. What occurs when a religion bases itself on the behavior of fictional characters of another religion? The fiction of the earlier religion is transported into the later religion. This seem to be the case for Judaism’s two offspring—JudeoChristianity and JudeoIslam.

<sup>397</sup> In his *Early Greek Philosophy* John Burnet says of the founders of Greek scientific philosophy, the Ionians, “In all this there is no trace of theological speculation. We have seen that there had been a complete break with the early Aegean religion and that the Olympian polytheism never has a firm hold on the Ionian mind. It is therefore quite wrong to look for the origins of Ionian science in mythological ideas of any kind.” (13) Burnet also says, “...the Greeks never had a priestly class and that may well have had something to do with the rise of free science.” (4) Superstition puts a drag the free, independent thinking required by philosophy and science. Greek philosophical-scientific thinking flourished in such a remarkable manner because the Greeks checked “the growth of a superstition like that which ultimately stifled Egypt and Babylon.” (4)

countless elements of things, impelled by blows and by their own weight, have never ceased to move in manifold ways, making all kinds of unions and experimenting with everything they could combine to create. (149)

The possibilities of being are apparently infinite—ranging from inorganic, organic, conscious, self-conscious, natural and artificial. Without God, the Universe is a magnificent place far more interesting and mysterious than God.

### **Offering Peace of Mind**

Lucretius' poem *On the Nature of Things* is addressed to Gaius Memmius, a friend and perhaps patron, and the intent of the poem is to persuade Memmius to adopt the worldview of Democritus and Epicurus, based on the combination of inductive/deductive logic and empirical observation, rather than on the myth and imagination of superstition. Lucretius believed that by doing so Memmius would achieve peace of mind.

Lucretius was a poet therapist rather than a philosopher or scientist. He adopted the science of Democritus and the philosophy of Epicurus because he believed they were true, clearly verifiable by observation, and because, in this case, the truth provided greater peace of mind. Ironically, Lucretius often describes how unfriendly nature can be toward her creatures, and, clearly, the scientific view of the world is not one that is especially conducive to peace of mind. Consistent with science, Lucretius knew that death meant the absolute end of one's existence. However, as part of the Greco-Roman tradition he was made of sterner stuff than the JudeoChristians and JudeoMuslims who long to live forever. Lucretius believed that even the gods (basically supermen and superwomen) were eventually doomed because they too were made of atoms. Lucretius even offers his own version of entropy: "All things gradually decay and head for the reef of destruction, exhausted by long lapses of time." (65)

Yet, as frightening as nature could be, more frightening were the gods and an eternal afterlife in some gloomy realm or a place of torment, such was the fate of Tantalus who was sent to Tartarus (the underworld's place of punishment) where he endured various torments, including being "paralyzed with vain terror," having a "huge rock suspended over him in the air." (94) Just how terrifying the belief in the afterlife could be would have to wait on the appearance of the Quran, which is essentially scripture devoted to terrifying the reader or listener, who is threatened on every other page with the horrors of Hell. Interestingly, as far as I know, Greek mythology, unlike JudeoChristianity and JudeoIslam, does not have people being punished in Hell for disbelief or preferring one god over another. Tantalus had to commit a very serious crime to be sent to be punished in Tartarus: He killed his son Pelops, cooked him by roasting the pieces of his body, and served him to the Gods.

That's evil. Even so, Tantalus' punishment is a slap on the wrist compared to what Allah has in store for independent thinking disbelievers.

For Lucretius death was neither to be sought nor feared. It meant that pain and happiness are no longer possible because for that which is not neither suffering nor pleasure is possible. Lucretius believed that though life is unavoidably painful humanity itself was responsible for most of the suffering humans endured, including the invention of terrifying religious myths. Smith tells us that "The times through which Lucretius lived were dominated by intense social and political unrest and punctuated with outbreaks of revolution and war" (ix). Humanity's willingness to inflict suffering upon itself hasn't changed since Lucretius' day—as the horrors of the twentieth century's revolutions and world wars remind us. Thus far the 21<sup>st</sup> century forebodes more of the same. Lucretius lamented the new invention of weapons that "heightened the horrors of war." (172) He says that as dangerous as life was for early humans who "pursued the wild beast of the forest with sling-stones and ponderous clubs... never in those times did a single day consign to destruction many thousands of men marching beneath military standards." (163-4) The biggest threat to humanity and human happiness is not nature but human nature.

Unlike the naively religious Stoics who believed a beneficent deity was in control of the world, but very much like many people today, Lucretius and his mentor, Epicurus, were not optimistic concerning the larger picture of the human condition. This sounds defeatist, and it is but no more so than JudeoChristianity or JudeoIslam, both of which gave up on life in the mundane world and placed all bets on the postmortem. And really, neither Lucretius nor Epicurus gave up completely on this life but shifted the focus of salvation away from society to the individual. Salvation was not going to Heaven but finding happiness (peace of mind) in this world. This was accomplished by finding ways to improve the individual's life by giving him or her more control over it. In fact, self-control is the major key to an individual's achieving happiness. Also essential are adopting an attitude of truthfulness based on empirical reason, living on little (167) by reining in the appetites, and becoming a member of a small community of friends.

If this sounds like a village of neighborly yet self-reliant residents who enjoy the simple pleasures associated with nature, work, family, and friends, that's because the Epicurean mini-utopia isn't new but very old. A nation that can behave like a village—modern-day Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Netherlands, Switzerland, Canada, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand—can be utopian. Stoics encouraged participation in public affairs, an attitude that was in accord with the mindset of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Without high-minded public servants, utopian societies cannot be achieved. Unfortunately, citizens and/or leaders of most nations too often lack the required element of self-control, high-mindedness, and the belief that less is often more required to create a society that offers health, safety, work, fun, and opportunity for self-realization. When a society fails to do this,

individuals feel lost, helpless, and threatened. That's when self-help philosophies are needed. If individuals can't change the world, they can change themselves—their way of thinking and behaving. That's what Epicureanism offers.

Epicureanism's therapeutic focus on the happiness of the individual seems very modern given the rise of self-help philosophies and the mental health industry. Yet, advising individuals how to take control of their lives in a turbulent world for the sake of achieving mental/spiritual tranquility was not as uncommon in the ancient world as one might think. The Stoics, Buddhists, and Taoists offered methods similar to those of Epicureanism, and, as I have argued, the historical Jesus engaged in pastoral counseling that empowered individuals to take control of their spiritual lives. The central principle his life embodied was thinking more about the welfare of others than about oneself. This was accomplished not adopting a particular religious myth but by existential acts of care that improved other people's lives in the mundane world thus increasing their happiness and peace of mind. There is no better illustration of this than the parable of the Good Samaritan. As it turns out, Lucretius' mentor, Epicurus, was just such a person.

### Offering the Truth

What does one really learn from scripture about the world? Very little. The cosmology of the Book of Genesis, for example, doesn't describe the particulars of how the Universe was created. It simply describes God's bringing into existence integral parts of the world by commanding them to appear.\* Here are some examples. God said, "Let there be light" and there was light. He said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear," and Voila! the water and ground were separated. He said, "Let the land produce vegetation," "Let the water teem with living creatures," and "Let the land produce living creatures," and all that was accomplished just by word alone. And we are told that "God made the wild animals according to their kinds," et cetera, et cetera. Exactly how all this occurred is not revealed. All that is "revealed" is that it supposedly happened. What are missing are the particulars of the Universe's creation.<sup>398</sup> What is described is not knowledge,

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<sup>398</sup> The Jewish theologian Philo Judaeus attempted to provide the particulars of divine creation and the result both bizarre and ludicrous. Here is his explanation of why the number 6 was chosen for number of days it took God to create the world:

When, therefore, Moses says, "God completed his works on the sixth day," we must understand that he is speaking not of a number of days, but that he takes six as a perfect number. Since it is the first number which is equal in its parts, in the half, and the third and sixth parts, and since it is produced by the multiplication of two unequal factors, two and three. And the numbers two and three exceed the incorporeality which exists in the unit; because the number two is an image of matter being divided into two parts and dissected like matter. And the number three is an image of a solid

not even justified believe. At best it's somebody's opinion based on what that somebody imagined happened. The cosmology of Genesis is myth, and myth is not a source of knowledge.

\*The Abrahamic god is not an artisan but a magician. He really doesn't create at all because he doesn't engage in a creative process, as artists do, for example. Actually, he can't because God cannot sully himself by engaging directly with the mundane world.

Certainly, the Abrahamic scriptures provide a mythic window on the human psyche and human nature. It's not a pretty picture. The Old Testament offers a very cynical view of humanity, and its religion is characterized by greed, hatred, betrayal, and desire for revenge. According to the Old Testament, the ancient Jews hated non-Jews (pagans) and often themselves. Their God, Yahweh, is a bully. He does to the people that Jews see as enemies what the Jews wish they could do. That is the wish-fulfilment of ancient Judaism. There are fragments of history that actually occurred, mostly distorted by aggrandizing scribes. Most of the history given is fictional. Noah, Moses, and Abraham are mythical, not historical, characters. And King David and King Solomon were tribal chiefs, nothing more.

The two most profound and entertaining books of the Old Testament are Ecclesiastes and Job. Both the protagonists challenge the idea that Yahweh is a beneficent and just God. The Old Testament is full of stories, but their mythical context lessens rather than enhances their entertainment value. Of course, the language of the Bible—Old and New Testaments—is remarkably beautiful, but I can't say whether that beauty originated in the original Hebrew and Greek or was provided by inspired translators who produced English versions of the Bible. Still, what can be learned from the Old Testament about the mundane world that is humanity's home? Almost nothing.

The same goes for the New Testament, which is essentially a textbook on Judeo-Christian theology. It does offer an entertaining story about an itinerate narcissistic rabbi who is often frustrated by people rejecting his claim to be God's messenger. Eventually the post-Gospels portion of the New Testament declared him to be God incarnate and warns of the world's destruction when he decides to return. However, the New Testament is redeemed by the existential Jesus' caring, self-sacrificing attitude toward people most ignored and most in need of care and affection. Unlike the Old Testament, Jesus' view of humanity is not cynical or hateful. And though at times he becomes disillusioned, over all he seems to believe that humans are capable of doing the right thing. However, the rest of the New

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body, because a solid can be divided according to a threefold division. (*Works*, "Creation of the World," vol. 1, bk 1.)

Of course, the real story has nothing to do with the number 6 and everything to do with 14 billion years of cosmic evolution.

Testament seems to lack Jesus' faith in humanity—illustrated both by his crucifixion and the fact that most of humanity will not make the grade and will be destroyed and/or sent to Hell.

Of the three Abrahamic scriptures, one learns least from the Quran. That is because it has nothing to say about the mundane world other than its having been created by God. Nothing specific can be said about that process since it's considered a mystery. Much of Quran consists of shorten and often distorted versions of stories taken from the Bible. Because most of those stories are myths or legends, there is nothing to learn from them, and repeating them does not make them more informative. The main purposes of referring to the stories is to warn readers or listeners that disbelievers will be severely punished and to present ideal role models, men who have surrendered themselves completely to God, men such as Abraham and Moses.

The Quran contains very little theology. I don't count as theology epithets such as almighty, all wise, forgiving, merciful, severe in punishment, all-knowing, etc., which are on every page. Allah is a two-dimensional character, self-obsessed, hateful, and angry. He is described as having a throne, which gives the impression that he is understood to be the king of the cosmos, and he behaves as a tyrannical monarch.

### **Ethically Barren**

Finally, the Quran offers little that is ethically illuminating or morally useful. The care of the most vulnerable—widows, the poor, orphans, etc.—simply repeats the ethical insights of the New Testament. Greater respect for women is demanded, yet this respect is compromised by Allah's outrage at being accused of having daughters. In the Quran women are worth something but only half as much as men: "God commands you that a son should have the equivalent share of two daughters." (4:11) The Quran allows men four wives (Muhammad had twelve) and female captives. (4:3) The Quran does expect the wives to be provided for and treated justly or fairly, that they all be treated equally, no favorites. A slave wife was not entitled to same material benefits, but was supposed to be treated kindly. Being worth something is better than being worth nothing ethically (having no moral rights or moral value), but rights accorded women by the Quran are hardly a great ethical advancement. If so, one can only conclude that the condition of women in pre-Islamic Arabia must have been absolutely awful. The missing truth is that women are ethically equal to men and deserve the same freedom allowed men. That's the revelation one would expect from God.

### **Dubious Morality**

However, not only does the Quran offer few if any new moral insights, much of what it says is contrary to a just, humane moral system. It is unjust, for example,



that women be given half the value of men. It is unjust to burn disbelievers in Hell. And threatening people with Hell\* degrades and condemns people who want to think independently and who do not want to surrender their minds and lives to a religious ideology.

\*This might be called gun-to-the-head persuasion, basically, frightening a person into making a particular decision. That is not allowing free choice because it involves coercion (terrifying the chooser). Such a method of persuasion is unethical and barbaric. This is especially true given the so-called crime is simply some form of disbelief or misbelief, not a crime involving harming another person. Essentially, the crime is an action that is considered an affront to God, even if no disrespect was intended. Clearly, Allah is offended by acts of disbelief or misbelief; otherwise, the threats of Hell wouldn't exist on every other page of the Quran. Nevertheless, the idea that God—creator of the Universe—would be offended or insulted by such behavior (or any behavior, for that matter) is absurd and illogical. Equally absurd is the idea that God would be obsessed with being worshiped. That is God's paramount concern in all three Abrahamic scriptures: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me!" Or, "Thou shalt worship me or burn in Hell."

Because the morality of JudeoIslam—consistent with traditional Judaism generally—is God-centered, the focus of moral judgment is on the act in relation to the will of God, not on the act itself or even on the victim of the act. For example, the Quran says "Cut off the hands of thieves, whether they are man or woman, as a punishment for what they have done—a deterrent from God: God is almighty and wise." (5:38) Personally, I find the punishment horrific, but what is especially revealing about it is its focus on the act in relation to God rather than on the act itself, the theft or even the victim of the theft. What is left out of the judgment is consideration of the harm done as a result of the action. In this case, what makes theft so morally egregious? Because it is an offense against God (more so than against the victim of the theft). It is an act of disobedience. The thief isn't being punished because he or she stole but because he or she disobeyed God. A moral system that focuses primarily on the act in relation to the will of God is an inhumane moral system, which can and has given birth to inhumane religious and political institutions.

### **Discouraging Moral Reasoning**

Ethically, the Quran is not heuristically useful (intellectually stimulating) because it fails to encourage a person to understand, evaluate, and solve ethical problems on his or her own. I understand this is not necessarily the purpose of scripture, but scripture can be faulted when it discourages moral reasoning. Essentially, the Quran does not appeal to moral reason. It only commands, and commands do not need to be justified. For example, demanding the cutting off of the hands of thieves does not explain why thievery is wrong, whether its wrongness is the same in every case, or why amputation is just punishment. And focusing on punishment hardly encourages critical thinking concerning the wrongness of the act

and the fairness of the punishment. To the contrary, the gruesome punishment would tend to discourage questioning God's judgment since doing so would place one in the category of those who challenge God's authority.

The act of theft is wrong and deserving of amputation because God says so. That's the end of the matter. What is lacking here is any confidence humans' thinking for themselves, or worse that it doesn't matter that they can think for themselves. Commanding someone to do something teaches them nothing. Allah says, "be charitable—it is for your own good" (64:16), meaning doing so will result in postmortem prosperity; not doing so will result in postmortem punishment. As such, the motivation/justification is selfish. What about a good deed being its own reward? What about the principle of equality—treating others as you would have them treat you? Why should one do that? Scripture's answer is to please God—in particular, not to make him angry and be punished as a result. That hardly counts as an ethically enlightening explanation and certainly doesn't encourage ethical reasoning. It encourages people to become ethical automatons.

### **Aesthetic Value**

Being basically a catalogue of demands and commands, the Quran lacks the thought-provoking and entertaining narratives found in the other two Abrahamic scriptures. The references to Biblical stories are too brief to be entertaining. Of course, their purpose is not to entertain but, for the most part, to warn. The intention of the Biblical stories was not to entertain, but they are entertaining nevertheless. And that leads me to believe that the writers were essentially storytellers who enjoyed spinning an entertaining yarn and would become enthralled with the tale they were telling. Their stories were written with the same creative enthusiasm as were the epic poems the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and *Beowulf*. Of course, they were written by a very large team of writers, not just one, over centuries, not years. The Quran contains no protagonist like Jesus. Muhammad, who actually lived a life that could be made into a Hollywood movie, serves only as a court reporter in the Quran. There is no intriguing biography like the Old Testament's fascinating, complex story of the flawed, larger than life King David. That story is mostly fiction but entertaining fiction, nonetheless.

In English translation the Quran also lacks the poetic beauty of the King James Bible. The Quran is said to have poetic beauty in its original language, Arabic. And what I have heard recited bears this out. However, I've also wondered whether the repeated chanting of the Quran doesn't have a hypnotic effect on the listener. For example, the sura title *The Feast* says, "As to the thief, Male or female, cut off his or her hands: a punishment by way of example, from Allah, for their crime: Allah is mighty and wise." (5:38) To me the idea of cutting off a person's hands is morally repugnant and in no way is a sign of wisdom. Yet the chanting of the verse has a narcotic effect that seems to spiritualize the words, transforming a morally repulsive act into one that is felt to be in some way sublime. Music can have that effect. One

famous illustration is the music from the *Ride of the Valkyries* in the movie *Apocalypse Now* during a helicopter attack on a Vietnamese village. And once again, the barbaric punishment illustrates how any act can be morally justified if committed on God's behalf. In an odd way, vicious the punishment is used to glorify God. The more vicious, the greater his glory.

In any case, it's the sound of the language that gives beauty to the words of the Quran, not the meaning of what is said. Regardless of the quality of its language, most of the meaning of the Quran lacks beauty. It's simply too mean-spirited, hateful, threatening, and horrific—and repetitively so. I opened the Quran at chapter thirteen and before stopping counted sixteen chapters in succession that refer to Allah's punishment of disbelievers. Threats of punishment are in almost every chapter of the Quran, and the hateful, threatening refrains quickly becomes tiresome. The Judeo-Christian counterpart would be the Book of Revelation. It's poetically dressed up but is still a gothic horror story. What makes it most awful is its claim to be true. That is what makes the Quran an awful read—unpleasant, ugly, and dreadful. If it were true, life would truly be a nightmare. Allah's hatred for those who refuse to become his slaves ranks with Iago's hatred of Othello. But Iago is human so an interesting character study,<sup>399</sup> and his use of rhetorical manipulation is fascinating, whereas Allah relies solely on heavy-handed threats. And, of course, Shakespeare's tragedy is redeemed by the wonder-inspiring Desdemona. Even the cruel and foolish Othello redeems himself.

What the Quran lacks is the human element. There is no Jesus suffering on the cross, no Job standing up to God, no Koheleth pondering the absence of divine justice in world and the futility of all human striving, no authoritarian Moses, no foolish David whose every good deed is compromised by an evil one, no disgusting Lot who offers his virgin daughters to rapists to protect a couple of angels, no embezzling Joseph, no lying Abram, no infanticidal Abraham, no loathsome rapist (Shechem son of Hamor), no treacherous sons of Jacob. The dominant character of the Quran is Allah, but he is literally inhuman. That such a view of God—originating in the Old Testament—could become generally accepted is perhaps the most astounding and disillusioning aspect of Quran.

However, it is the presence of so many naysaying disbelievers that I find most revealing. Concomitant with the endless threats found throughout the Quran, they reveal the essential purpose of the scripture: to frighten and entice naysayers. Clearly, their multiplicity suggests that Muhammad's revelation is neither self-evidence nor persuasive. Muhammad claims his revelation is "based on clear evidence" (12:108), but apparently it is clear only to himself; otherwise, there would not be so many disbelievers.

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<sup>399</sup> Iago is male jealousy (that of Othello's) embodied as a separate character; thus allowing the psychological phenomenon to be examined in all its emotional, rhetorical, psychological complexity.

Disbelievers find his claim about resurrection to be incredible: “What! After we have died and become dust and bones, shall we really be raised up again, along with our forefathers?” (37:16-17) The clearest evidence offered by Muhammad are the “many signs in the heavens and the earth that they [disbelievers] pass by and give no heed.” (12:105) That’s because what they see is simply nature, not God. To be considered evidence for God they must imagine what they cannot see, that nature is a sign or indicator of that which is absolute imperceptible—God.

For not believing in that which they cannot in any way experience, “overwhelming punishment from God” will “fall upon them” (12:107), which they doubt as well. How can one not admire independent thinkers who refuse to be threatened into accepting as true that which they don’t believe? And how can one take seriously a bullying deity that so totally disrespects the integrity of the human intellect? That is perhaps the greatest mystery offered by the Quran. The disbelievers are it most redeeming feature.

### **Either/Or**

So what revelation does one choose? Either the dogmatic superstition of the Abrahamic religions *or* the aesthetic, rational revelations of Lucretius, Basho, and Hemingway. Either God, hidden from view, transcendent, angry, self-centered *or* nature, indifferent yet beautiful creator and provider of all things. Either a prejudicial God who unjustly condemns most of humanity to the fires of Hell *or* impartial nature that without hostility or hatred reclaims all things to merciful oblivion. Either a life as an unquestioning slave to an authoritarian God and his priestly authorities *or* life as an autonomous thinker who is his or her own master. Either a life programmed by an ancient religious myth *or* one of personal self-realization. Either a life determined by God-centered morality *or* one determined by moral concern for humans and other creatures who actually suffer. Either a life devoted to divine No-thing that doesn’t live but simply exists *or* a life devoted to living in the mundane world in an attitude of appreciative awareness.

### **The “One Book Is All You Need” Theory**

The “one book is all you need” theory is a hallmark (standard of purity) of the Abrahamic religions. The “all that’s needed” books are the Old Testament, the New Testament, or the Quran. So the question that arose was what to do with all those other books? The answer was to destroy them, burn them if possible. The Christian Emperors of Rome hated the pagans, and that included all the great philosophers, scientists, and artists that made ancient Greece the greatest flowering of human culture the world has known. And that would also include the writers of the other revelations I’ve just discussed: Hemingway, Basho, and Lucretius.

Emperor Theodosius I, a great favorite of Christianity, was a pagan hater. In his *The Closing of the Western Mind* Charles Freeman say, “Theodosius had passed

laws that in effect banned all expressions of cult worship at pagan shrines. Encouraged by the initiative, Christian mobs now began destroying the great shrines of the ancient world.” (225) This is just part of the legacy of Christ. However, temples were not always just shrines but libraries. The temples of Alexandria were closed by Patriarch Theophilus of Alexandria in AD 391. Again, Freeman: “Edward Gibbon notes the story that Bishop Theophilus of the city allowed the celebrated library to be pillaged ‘and nearly twenty years afterward, the appearance of empty shelves excited the regret and indignation of every spectator whose mind was not totally darkened by religious prejudice.’” (317)

The crusades against the pagans and the forms of learning associated with them (philosophy, science, drama, poetry, history, mythology, etc.) meant the disappearance of books and secular education. “Learning became an increasingly ecclesiastical preserve, even those who were not ecclesiastics were likely to get their education from the scriptures or from Christian texts.” (Averil Cameron quoted in Freeman 316) Saint Philastrius, Bishop of Brescia, “implicitly declared that the search for empirical knowledge was in itself a heresy” (316):

There is a certain heresy regarding earthquakes that they come not from God’s command and indignation, but, it is thought, from the very nature of the elements... Paying no attention to God’s power, they [the heretics] presume to attribute the motions of force to the elements of nature... like certain foolish philosophers who, ascribing this to nature, know not the power of God. (Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* 88)<sup>400</sup>

“These views have Augustine [who had met Philastrius] as their most authoritative proponent. For him inquiry of any sort that we would call science is a target of ridicule.” (MacMullen 88) But Philastrius/Augustine mentality would also be the one

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<sup>400</sup> Lucretius attributes to catastrophes, such as earthquakes, people believing in “the existence of gods with such vast powers and such stupendous strength.” (170) Later he attempts to provide natural, rather than supernatural, explanations for earthquakes. His approach is to extrapolate that what happens on the surface of the earth happen below the surface, which is assumed to be a cavernous realm shaken by strong winds and earthshaking landslides. He was wrong and could not have got it right without more precise empirical observation. But his wrong explanations—which assume that subterranean disturbances are caused by natural forces—are closer to the truth than the view that God in some manner causes earthquakes to punish humanity. The interesting thing about earthquakes is that they destroy good and evil people alike. That would mean if they occur only at God’s command, then when they destroy the lives of good people God acts unjustly. That’s the kind of reasoning a philosopher would engage in. The theologian’s response would be to condemn the philosopher of blasphemy. End of argument.

adopted for understanding disease. Thus, leprosy, for example, “was said to be a punishment sent by God for lust.” (Freeman 320)

Perhaps the most famous expression of the “One Book Is All You Need” mentality comes from a follower of Muhammad Amr ibn al-As, an Islamic conqueror who marched upon Alexandria, and supposedly by the order of the Caliph Omar burnt the Alexandrian library. Concerning the burning of the Alexandrian library, it is claimed that Amr said that “If these writings of the Greeks agree with the Book of God [Quran], they are useless, and need not be preserved; if they disagree they are pernicious, and should be destroyed.” The shorter version is “Burn the libraries, for they are contained in one book,” again the Quran.\* Of course, Amr statement is uninformed because he knew nothing about what the books of the library contained. The key thing is his belief that he did not need to know what the books contained because he already knew all that he needed to know from the Quran—about the purpose and creation of the Universe as declared by Allah.

Renan says that “Umar did not burn, as is often repeated, the Library of Alexandria... But the principle that he had caused to triumph in the world was in fact truly destructive of scholarly research and of various works of the mind.” (*Islam and Science* 3)

Durant tells us that “According to Bar-Hebraeus [a Syrian bishop] Amr distributed the contents of the library among the city’s public baths whose 4000 furnaces were fueled for six months with the papyrus and parchment rolls.” (*The Age of Faith* 283)

Two and a half centuries earlier (391), that other one-book-is-all-you-need religion, Christianity, proved its attitude toward the works of the pagans was just as unenlightened. The temple Serapeum was an annex to the Great Library of Alexandria and served as the main repository of books and rolls after the larger library was destroyed. In response to the solicitation of Theophilus, twenty-third Pope of Alexandria, Emperor Theodosius issued an order that pagan temples were to be destroyed. The riots were provoked by Theophilus resulted in the Temple of Serapis being torn down by a Christian mob. The total loss of books has been estimated from 40,000 to 400,000.

How different from Aristotle who would always begin a topic by reviewing and evaluating what his predecessors had to say on the topic. What occurred was a shift from the rational to the irrational. Jesus appeal to the poor and downtrodden because they were uneducated and thus most receptive to his rationally incredible message rooted in his own imagination and the imagination of others. The imagination is contrary to reason because the imagination can fantasize anything as being true. Reason requires empirical and logical evidence, not simply flights of fancy. The Quran also appeals to people who are unsophisticated, uncritical, and uneducated. It is an appeal to people who have the least confidence in their intellectual ability, people who are willing to believe without proper or adequate evidence. Such people prefer to rely on the weakest justification for

belief—authority. And people who are critical, sophisticated thinkers are threatened and coerced into believing what they don't truly believe. Destroying books is a way of dumbing down a culture by eliminating the competition and instituting a Single Vision of reality and life based on imagination-inspired revelation. Once the religious Single Vision crowds out the competition and domesticates free thinking individuals—philosophers, scientists, artist, or simply ordinary people who rely on common sense (their native intelligence)—it is as if a lobotomy has been performed on the culture by “reducing the complexity of psychic life.” (Maurice Partridge quoted in “Lobotomy,” *Wikipedia*)

Freeman tells us that with the rise of JudeoChristianity “Intellectual self-confidence and curiosity, which lay at the heart of the Greek achievement, were recast as the dreaded sin of pride.” (322) Ergo, thinking is a sin. Don't think just believe what you're being told. Again Freeman: “Faith and obedience to the institutional authority of the church were more highly rated than the use of reasoned thought.” (322) Of course, the BIG QUESTION is why should the institution be afraid of other viewpoints and ways of thinking if the truth it represents really is the truth? The answer is, of course, is that the evidence upon which its “truth” is based is simply the revelations (imaginings) of prophets collected into works called scripture and declared the truth by the religious institutions that depend upon their being true. If the legitimacy of the revelations and scriptures are questioned, then the very legitimacy of the religious institution is questioned.

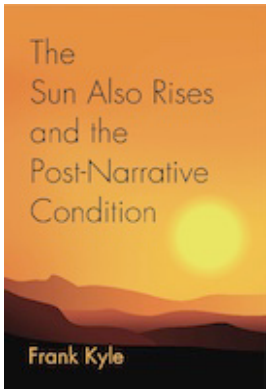
Philosophy and science don't work that way. Lucretius often expresses uncertainty about his claims. That's okay. With philosophy, science, and art there is no institution, no collective, no grandiose organization that dictates what is true or beautiful. The most oppressive and harmful organizations have been authoritarian religious and political organizations—which cannot tolerate criticism because they are based only on claims they decree to be true because they decree them to be true. Such institutions *demand* that their claims be respected and held as truth. However, the truth doesn't need to be defended by threats of force, punishment, or retaliation. Only questionable claims or belief systems must rely on intimidation and oppression.

Freeman notes that Greek science (Western science) began with Thales' prediction of an eclipse in 585 B.C. The last recorded astronomical observation occurred in A.D. 475. It would be over a thousand years before astronomical studies could once again move forward. (322) After having existed for nine centuries, Plato's Academy was closed in 529 A.D. by the JudeoChristian emperor Justinian I as a pagan institution that taught ideas incompatible with Christian dogma. So not only were libraries and their books being destroyed but also schools and pagan temples. What was occurring was intellectual cleansing—intellectually dumbing down a culture by reducing all sources of ideas to a Single Vision based on revelations of religiously inspired individuals.

Of course, it all makes sense if the claims of the Bible and the Quran are true—that the Universe was created by God so that he could be worshiped by humanity and in the end he will reward those who worshiped him and punish those who didn't and at that time the second postmortem phase of cosmic history will begin. If true, then there is no reason to investigate and understand the marvels of nature, no reason to progress socially, politically, morally, and technologically. There is no reason to be reading books unrelated to one's faith or taking an interest in the workings of nature and human society. One need not read even the Bible or Quran but simply listen to the sermons of rabbis, priests, minister, or imams. Pray morning, noon, and night and wait for death, the resurrection, and God's judgment and punishment or reward. End of story. There is nothing more to know.

And if you're wrong? A once in a lifetime opportunity forever missed? If you're wrong, then when you're dead you're dead and, as Lucretius would reassure, in death there are no regrets, no painful second thoughts, or what ifs, just nothing, peaceful nothing.





*The Sun also Rises presents the ontology, ethics, and aesthetics of Hemingway's worldview by examining the post-Narrative condition that emerged after World War I. It describes the postwar generation's response to the war's negation of the traditional meanings and values embedded in religious and secular grand narratives.*

*The Sun Also Rises and the Post-Narrative Condition suggests a new orientation to the world that might be called religious. The Great War proved the old anthropomorphic religions incapable of sustaining peace. To the contrary, history has shown that time and again they encourage conflict. Then the question that arises is whether there can be a religion without a god. A religion requires that which is adored, revered, and cherished. The Sun Also Rises suggests that that the mundane world itself is such an object and that nature is the mysterium tremendum, the mysterious primordial origin of all things. A new religion must encourage peace rather than conflict and reveal the mundane world as humanity's true primordial progenitor and as such the only object deserving of religious adoration. And, as Jake illustrates in *The Sun Also Rises*, in this new religion each person achieves absolute value and self-realization through acts of appreciative understanding.*

## **The Sun Also Rises And the Post-Narrative Condition**

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