GOD AND MAN IN DOGVILLE:
MEMES, MARKETING, AND THE
EVOLUTION OF RELIGION IN THE WEST

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of
The School of Continuing Studies
and of
The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

By
Joel Bergsman, Ph.D.

Georgetown University
Washington DC
1 November 2013
GOD AND MAN IN DOGVILLE:
MEMES, MARKETING, AND THE EVOLUTION OF RELIGION IN THE WEST

Joel Bergsman, Ph.D.

Mentor: Arnold J. Bradford, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The movie *Dogville* (2003) provides viewers with a rare and provocative twist on differences between on the one hand the rigorous, Old Testament Jehovah, characterized by rules, and by rewards or punishments in this life, and on the other hand the loving, forgiving Christ and God of the New Testament and later Christianity who are characterized by forgiveness, and by rewards or punishments in an eternal afterlife. The movie, especially its ending, challenges the forgiving nature of the New Testament God and Christ, and makes a case that the Old Testament, rigorous Jehovah is more appropriate, at least for humans who respect themselves as responsible grown-ups.

Earlier than these two views of God and man, and still alive and kicking, is a third view, the “Heroic.” God is irrelevant here, either as a source of rules or as a source of forgiveness and redemption. Rather, man generates his own meaning by accepting his fate and struggling to do the best he can; this life is all there is and the struggle, *i.e.* living it is the only meaning.

The three views can be seen on a continuum with the Heroic on one end and the forgiving Christ on the other, and the rigorous Jehovah in between and closer to the heroic than to the forgiving.
The Dogville point of view, preferring a rigorous God to a forgiving one, is very rarely found in literature (the Grand Inquisitor episode in The Brothers Karamazov is similar to some extent) but both the Heroic and the forgiving Christian views appear everywhere, in all kinds of non-fiction, and either explicitly or as metaphors or parables in fiction. The Heroic view is taken here to include not only classic Greek and Roman heroic writings (e.g. those of Homer and Virgil) but also more modern schools of thought including Nietzsche, the existentialists, and other “God is dead” points of view.

The paucity of the first view in literature is mirrored by the small number of its followers: all self-identifying Jews are less than 0.5% of the world’s population and the orthodox are a minority within that. In stark contrast, about one-third of individuals world-wide self-identify as Christian. Followers of the Heroic view, roughly measured by self-identifying atheists and perhaps including agnostics, are between 15 and 20 percent of the population of the USA.

Focusing on the United States, the data show that the number of adherents of each of the two extremes of an expanded continuum, i.e. the Heroic view on one hand and the born-again Protestant version of the forgiving view on the other, has been growing while the numbers of followers of everything in the middle, i.e. Judaism (excluding its New Age, non-religious variants), Roman Catholicism, and mainstream Protestantism have been declining.

The waxing and waning of these different views are evaluated in the lights of literature, philosophy, psychology, marketing, and the idea that ideas (“memes” as coined, described and popularized by Richard Dawkins) evolve, endure or disappear.
according to the Darwinian principle of natural selection. The conclusion is that there are important, long-term reasons for the observed trend, and that therefore both born-again Protestantism and atheism are likely to continue to take market share from their competitors in the middle.
PROLOGUE

The subtitle of this thesis claims too much. More accurately it should say something like “Some Speculations about Memes, Marketing, and Some Aspects of the Evolution of Some Religions in the West.” Accuracy was sacrificed for brevity. The paper is a “think piece,” that is, a new juxtaposition of some existing ideas, some already-known facts, and some creativity that helps to see the facts in a partly new way and to extend the ideas in a possibly correct and useful way. There is data but none of it is original, nothing is proven, and in this case no clear prescription for what might be good to do in the future appears. The modest hope is to be provocative, possibly to stimulate some new understanding or thoughts in the minds of any readers. Maybe, even, to have some fun.

To have fun was my intent when I enrolled in the Liberal Studies Program at Georgetown, in my 70th year. Having studied and worked at engineering, business, operations research, and economics, I wanted to taste philosophy, literature, history; in short, a broad view of the humanities. This adventure was a stupendous success. I loved it. I could have enjoyed taking courses forever but was faced with a requirement to write a thesis and thus complete the degree, in order to go beyond the required nine courses. If I were to do this work, I emphatically didn’t want it to be in a field that I already knew well. No fun… A few ideas came up, in particular I got very interested in evolutionary ethics (a part of evolutionary psychology) but after considerable exploration I rejected this as a topic for a thesis because I couldn’t see a way to
contribute to such an extremely popular and rapidly growing field. I also got interested in the related area of the evolution of religion, spurred on by what to me was the inexplicable number of my fellow Americans who say that they believe in the literal inerrancy of the Bible (around 45 percent, depending on the particular nature of the particular poll), even those parts that contradict well-established science and that seem to me, on their face, to be obvious myths created long ago and even, perhaps, never meant to be taken literally.

Then, some time after having completed my ninth course in the Liberal Studies program, and still with no workable thesis plan, I watched the cult movie *Dogville*. Its ending seemed to me a clever and fascinating parable about religion, in particular not so much what man owes to God but rather what God owes to man, with a moral that (at least in my interpretation) rejects the loving, forgiving New Testament God and Christ in favor of the rigorous, rule-enforcing Old Testament Jehovah. I wrote a short essay about that, showed it and talked about it (too much, I guess) to some family and friends, and with their reactions and some further thoughts I wondered if it could be the basis for a Master’s thesis. I contacted Professor Arnold Bradford and he kindly agreed to help to see if a satisfactory thesis could be developed. This document is the result of that process. Appropriately to the topic, the original idea has evolved considerably. The result turns out not to center on *Dogville*, but rather to use the parable at the end of the movie as a catalyst, a take-off point, for an examination of the evolution of the Judeo-Christian and the Heroic-Nietzschean-Existentialist views about man and God, mainly in the USA, from the two different perspectives of (a) memes; the evolution of ideas
according to Darwin’s theory of natural selection, and (b) business school marketing strategy.

Enough. As the clown in the Prologue to _Pagliacci_ commands (and as the psychiatrist suggests at the end of _Portnoy’s Complaint_), “incominciate!”

St Leonard MD, November 2013
Dedicated to the founders, faculty, administrators and students of Georgetown’s MALS program, to whom I owe a great debt.

Thanks to Arnold Bradford for valuable guidance both overall and in many particulars, and to Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, Mary, Jeremy and Michael Bergsman for helpful comments.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT  
PROLOGUE  
DEDICATION  
LIST OF TABLES  

## CHAPTER:

1. DOGVILLE  
2. THE GODLESS ALTERNATIVE  
3. SOME OTHER CONCEPTS OF GOD AND MAN IN THE WESTERN TRADITION  
4. MEMES, MARKETING, AND THE EVOLUTION OF RELIGION IN THE WEST  

APPENDIX: DOGVILLE REINTERPRETED IN SEATTLE  
REFERENCE LIST
LIST OF TABLES

1. RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN COUNTRIES WITH POPULATIONS OVER 10 MILLION 81

2. RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION IN THE UNITED STATES 82
CHAPTER 1

DOGVILLE

*Dogville* is a movie made by Danish director Lars von Trier, released in 2003.\(^1\) It generated a lot of controversy, both among critics and also with the general public. It is long, can be very boring, and is full of violence including graphic rape scenes. It also pretty clearly reflects von Trier’s well-known negative views of the United States, on which many commentators, especially in this country, focus. Both the story and the staging (which is a bare floor with “buildings” represented by chalk lines, and minimal scenery) invite the viewer to think about it as an allegory, something with meaning beyond the literal plot and dialog. This invitation has been taken up by many people, with many different interpretations, as an internet search quickly shows.

Our interest here is focused on the ending, along with whatever bare bones of the plot that are necessary to make any sense at all of the ending. We are not interested in the many other interpretations of the movie, and in particular whether they make sense or not; we offer our own interpretation as arguably valid but not necessarily the only one.

**The Plot**

Dogville is a very small, very poor town in the Rocky Mountains. It is literally at the end of the road. The time is during the Great Depression (the 1930s).

Late one night, gunshots are heard in the distance, and then a beautiful and well-dressed young woman, Grace, crawls over the rocks and into town. She is fleeing from

\(^1\) See the Internet Movie Data Base (IMDB) for more: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0276919/.
 whoever is shooting at her. She is greeted by Tom, an attractive young man, who sees himself as a philosopher (he has never written anything, and has no job) and also as some kind of moral instructor of his fellow townspeople. (Dogville has no clergy.)

Tom has the idea that his lectures on morality to his fellow townspeople would be more powerful if he had an “illustration,” and he gets the idea to use Grace and her plight as that illustration: a moral lesson for the town; by helping her they can be more virtuous.

The men who have been pursuing Grace drive into town; Grace hides and Tom denies ever having seen her. “The Boss” of these men gives Tom a card with his phone number, asking him to call if he ever sees Grace, saying “She’s very precious to me.”

Tom introduces Grace to his neighbors and proposes taking her in. After considerable discussion the townspeople agree to take Grace in and to protect her from her pursuers, and in return she agrees to help them by doing various chores for them.

Time passes and Grace is more and more accepted by the townspeople, as she helps them in various ways. Most of them are friendly to her and she is happy with the situation. She and Tom declare their love for each other but do nothing to express it beyond tender words and occasional kisses. One day a sheriff drives in and posts a “missing” notice for Grace; nobody says a word. Some days later he arrives again, posting a “wanted” notice. The townspeople know that she is innocent of the crimes (bank robberies) she allegedly committed, because she was with them at the time. They do not betray her, but their attitudes change, their blossoming friendships sour, and they begin to demand more and more from Grace while treating her worse and worse. Then she is raped by one of the men.
Grace refuses to blame the man or to complain, instead forgiving him while saying to Tom, “he’s not very strong.” But aided by Tom, she tries to escape the town with the help of the man who drives apples picked in the town to market. This man also rapes her, and further betrays her by bringing her back to town. She is accused of stealing money that was actually stolen by Tom to pay the driver, and Tom says nothing. At this the townspeople become really vicious. She is enslaved by a collar around her neck, with a chain attached to a heavy wheel which Grace can barely manage to drag behind her as she moves through the town. Everyone, including the children, treats her like a despised slave, and she is continually raped by the men of the town (not including Tom who says he loves her but does nothing to protect her). Grace accepts it all with barely a whimper, always blaming herself and excusing their atrocious behavior.

One day Tom abandons his moral stance, and his declared love for Grace, and decides to turn Grace in to the man who was pursuing her, whose card he has secretly kept. He hopes for a reward. He makes the call and a few days later several menacing-looking cars drive into town, full of gunmen. The townspeople flee in fear, and hide in their homes. The gunmen remove Grace’s collar. The Boss, sitting in the back of the last car, is shocked at what he sees: Grace dirty and with disheveled clothing, the collar
and wheel on the ground beside her. It turns out that he is her father, and he is upset with her. Here is the dialog of the end of the movie:\(^2\)

**Grace:** You need to justify your actions before you shoot us. That's new. That could be interpreted as weakness, Daddy... I'm disappointed in you!

**The Boss:** I'm not gonna shoot anybody.

**Grace:** You shot at me before.

**The Boss:** Yes. I’m sorry, I regret that. You ran away. But shooting at you certainly didn't help matters. Of course not. You're, far, far too stubborn.

**Grace:** If you don't want to kill me then why did you come?

**The Boss:** Our last conversation, the one in which you told me what it was you didn't like about me, never really concluded, as you ran away. I should be allowed to tell you what I don't like about you. That I believe would be a rule of polite conversation, you know.

**Grace:** That's why you showed up? And you call me stubborn. You're sure you're not here to force me to go back and become like you?

**The Boss:** If I felt there was a chance of forcing you -- but of course that will never happen. You are more than welcome to return home and become my daughter again anytime and I would even begin to share my power and responsibility with you if you did. Not that you care.

**Grace:** So what is it? What is it, the thing... the thing that you don't like about me?

**The Boss:** It was a word you used that provoked me. You called me arrogant.

**Grace:** To plunder as if it were a God given right. I'd call that arrogant, daddy.

**The Boss:** But that is exactly what I don't like about you. It is you that is arrogant!

\(^2\) I took this from [http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/d/dogville-script-transcript-nicole-kidman.html](http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/d/dogville-script-transcript-nicole-kidman.html), and corrected many mistakes in it.
**Grace:** That's what you came here say? I’m not the one passing judgment, Daddy, you are.

**The Boss:** No, you do not pass judgment, because you sympathize with them. A deprived childhood, and a homicide really isn't necessarily a homicide, right? The only thing you can blame is circumstances. Rapists and murderers may be the victims according to you, but I, I call them dogs, and if they're lapping up their own vomit the only way to stop them is with the lash.

**Grace:** But dogs only obey their own nature. So why shouldn't we forgive them?

**The Boss:** Dogs can be taught many useful things, but not if we forgive them every time they obey their own nature.

**Grace:** So, I’m arrogant? I’m arrogant because I forgive people?

**The Boss:** My God! Can't you see how condescending you are when you say that? You have this preconceived notion that nobody, listen, that nobody can possibly attain the same high ethical standards as you, so you exonerate them. I cannot think of anything more arrogant than that -- you, my child... my dear child. You forgive others with excuses that you would never in the world permit for yourself.

**Grace:** Why shouldn't I be merciful? Why?

**The Boss:** No, no, no. You should, you should be merciful when there’s a time to be merciful. But you must maintain your own standard. You owe them that. You owe them that. The penalty you deserve for your transgressions they deserve for their transgressions.

**Grace:** They are human beings.

**The Boss:** No, no, no. Does every human being need to be accountable for their actions? Of course they do. But you don't even give them that chance. And that is extremely arrogant. I love you, I love you, I love you to death. But you are the most arrogant person I have ever met. And you call me arrogant! I have no more to say.

**Grace:** You’re arrogant, I’m arrogant. You've said it, now you can leave.

**The Boss:** And without my daughter, I suppose?
Grace: Hmm...

The Boss: I said without my daughter?

Grace: Hmm, yes!

The Boss: Well...

Grace: Yes

The Boss: Well, you decide, you decide. Grace, they say you are having some trouble here.

Grace: No -- No more trouble than back home.

The Boss: I'm gonna give you a little time to think about this. Perhaps you will change your mind.

Grace: I won't.

The Boss: Listen, my love... power is not so bad... I am sure that you can find a way to make use of it in your own fashion... Take a walk and think about it.

Grace: The people who live here are doing their best under very hard circumstances.

The Boss: If you say so, Grace. But is their best really good enough? Do they love you?

Grace gets out of the car and walks around.

Narrator: Grace had already thought for a long time. She had known that if she were not shot when the gangsters arrived she would be faced with her father's suggestion that she return to become a conspirator with him and his gang of thugs and felons and she did not need any walk to reconsider her response to that. Even though the difference between the people she knew back home and the people she'd met in Dogville had proven somewhat slighter than she'd expected. Grace looked at the gooseberry bushes so fragile in the smooth darkness. It was good to know that if you did not treat them ill they would be there come spring as always and come summer they'd again be bursting with the quite incomprehensible quantity of berries that were so good in pies -- especially with cinnamon.
Grace looked around at the frightened faces behind the windowpanes that were following her every step and felt ashamed of being part of inflicting that fear. How could she ever hate them for what was at bottom merely their weakness? She would probably have done things like those that had befallen her if she had lived in one of these houses, to measure them by her own yardstick as her father put it. Would she not, in all honesty, have done the same as Chuck and Vera and Ben and Mrs. Henson and Tom and all these people in their houses?

Grace paused. And while she did, the clouds scattered and let the moonlight through and Dogville underwent another of those little changes of light. It was as if the light, previously so merciful and faint, finally refused to cover up for the town any longer. Suddenly you could no longer imagine a berry that would appear one day on a gooseberry bush, but only see the thorn that was there right now. The light now penetrated every unevenness and flaw in the buildings... And in... the people! And all of a sudden she knew the answer to her question all too well. If she had acted like them she could not have defended a single one of her actions and could not have condemned them harshly enough. It was as if her sorrow and pain finally assumed their rightful place. No. What they had done was not good enough. And if one had the power to put it to rights, it was one's duty to do so for the sake of the other towns. For the sake of humanity. And not least for the sake of the human being that was Grace herself.

**Grace gets back in the car and says to The Boss:** If I went back and became your daughter again, when would I be given the power you're talking about?

**The Boss:** Now.

**Grace:** At once?

**The Boss:** Why not?

**Grace:** So that would mean that I would also take on the immediate responsibilities at once. I’d be a part in the problem solving... like the problem... of Dogville.

**The Boss:** We can start by shooting a dog and nailing it to a wall. Over there beneath that lamp, for example. Well, it might help. It sometimes does.

**Grace:** It would only make the town more frightened, but hardly make it a better place. And it could happen again... Somebody happening by... revealing.... their frailty. That's what I wanna use the power for, if you don't mind -- I wanna make this world a little better.
The Boss:  Yeah

One of the Boss’s thugs opens the car door and addresses Grace:  That damn kid won't shut up.  Says he wants to talk to you, Miss.  Can we just shoot him now?

Grace: No, no, no.  Let me talk to him.

Grace gets out of the car and addresses Tom:  What?  What is it?

Tom: A man can't really be blamed for being scared now, can he?

Grace: No, that's true

Tom: No, I’m scared, Grace.  I used you, and I am sorry.  I am stupid, I am maybe even arrogant sometimes.

Grace: You are, Tom.

Tom: Although using people is not very charming, I think you have to agree that this specific illustration has surpassed all expectations.  It says so much about being human.  It’s been painful.  But I think you also have to agree it has been edifying, wouldn't you say?

Grace: Not now, Tom.  Not now.

Grace turns to The Boss and says: If there is any town this world would be better without, this is it.

The Boss turns to one of the thugs who says to him: Yes?

The Boss: Shoot them, burn down the town.

Grace hesitates.  The Boss asks her: What?  Something else, honey?

Grace: There is a family with kids...  Do the kids first and make the mother watch.  Tell her you will stop if she can hold back her tears.  I owe her that.  I’m afraid she cries a little too easily. 3

The Boss: We'd better get you out of here.  I’m afraid you've learned far too much already.  Are you cold, Sweetie?  Do you need a wrap?

---

3 This punishment mirrors a similar ordeal that the woman had gratuitously imposed on Grace.
Grace: I’m fine

A Thug: You want the curtains opened? You don't need them anymore.

The Boss (to Grace): What do you think?

Grace: I think we should open them. I think it's appropriate.

Flames, thugs shooting the people, shouts of horror from various children and adults: No! No, no. Oh, God, no! No, no, no! Mom, dad! No! Dad! No! Mom! Mom! Mom! Mom help! Help! Mom!

Grace takes a pistol from The Boss, gets out of the car, and approaches Tom who is still standing. Tom says to her: Bingo, Grace! Bingo! I have to tell you, your illustration beat the hell out of mine. It's frightening, yes, but so clear. Do you think that I can allow myself to use it as an inspiration in my writing?

Grace points the revolver at Tom’s head and says: Goodbye, Tom. She shoots him, returns to the car and says to The Boss: Some things you have to do yourself.

The Boss: Really? That one you're gonna have to explain to me on the way home.

Narrator: Suddenly there was a noise. Not so persuasive and powerful as it had been on one rainy night in spring but loud enough to work its way through the final sighs of the timber that was rapidly burning out. It came again. Everyone heard it. Grace was the first to recognize it.

Grace: That's Moses

Narrator: “That's Moses,” she said, and jumped out of the car. She quickly covered the distance to the dog pen through what, now the buildings were gone, could scarcely be called a street -- and certainly not Elm Street, as there wasn't a tree left on Dogville's little mountain ledge, let alone an elm. It was Moses. His survival was astonishing -- a miracle.

One of the thugs goes to shoot the dog.
**Grace:** No, no, no, just let him be. They will have spotted the flames in Georgetown by now. Someone will come and find him. He's just angry because I once took his bone.

**Grace gets in the car with the Boss, the thugs get in their cars and they all drive away.**

**Narrator:** Whether Grace left Dogville or on the contrary Dogville had left her and the world in general is a question of a more artful nature that few would benefit from by asking, and even fewer by providing an answer. And nor, indeed, will it be answered here.

**Analysis**

The Boss is God (and in particular he is the Old Testament Jehovah) and Grace (note the name) is Christ. There are additional parallels and signs pointing to this interpretation in the movie; *e.g.* Tom is Judas and/or maybe just a morally corrupt priest. At a Fourth of July celebration the townspeople sing “America;” only a part is heard and that part includes the line “God shed his grace on thee.” As already stated I am not attempting to prove anything here but merely to describe one arguable interpretation.

The main point of this interpretation is that the ending identifies differences between the Old Testament Jehovah and the Christian God/Christ. The Boss/Jehovah is all about right action, reward and punishment; humans need to follow his rules, and if humans break the rules they are in lots of trouble. (In *Dogville* we see only punishment, since every single person in the town is wicked. Since the punishment is clearly meted out for wickedness it seems reasonable to assume that good behavior would be rewarded.) Grace/Christ is all about love and forgiveness; humans are imperfect by nature, they are bound to break God’s rules, and they must be forgiven when they do so.
What makes this interesting is The Boss’s demonstrating to Grace that her forgiveness implies a lack of respect for humanity. If humans are to be respected (as autonomous agents), they must be held to account for their behavior and, if it merits punishment, they must be punished. And the punishment comes in this world; the movie has no reference to heaven, hell, or anything about an afterlife. According to the movie, Jehovah respects humanity while the Christian God/Christ disrespects us; indeed, treats us with even less respect than one might treat a child, or even a dog (!) who should be forgiven but also should be trained to follow the rules, as The Boss mentions to Grace. Until her conversion, however, Grace is not interested in holding people to account, nor even in teaching them to act better. She simply accepts them as they are. By forgiving the people their atrocious behavior, without protest or any other attempt to reform them, she shows less respect for the people of Dogsville than one would show a dog. The bottom line here is a view that the Christian God’s love and forgiveness demean us; if we need a god and also have some self-respect, we should pick the demanding and unforgiving Old Testament Jehovah, rather than the loving and forgiving God/Christ of the New Testament.\(^4\)

Instead of the Christian view that God sacrificed His son, allowing men to torture and execute Him, to wash away the sins of humanity, in Dogville God and Christ do just the opposite. The Boss/Jehovah rescues His daughter Christ from the cruelty of humans, and then persuades Her not to forgive but rather to punish. Jehovah

\(^4\) This dichotomy is now with us in US politics, in the form of a caricature of the Republican father saying “behave, and take care of yourselves” opposing the Democratic mother who loves, forgives and nurtures all sinners. These memes keep popping up in the strangest places; they just won’t go away!
converts Christ back to the Old Time, Old Testament religion. Grace pronounces the people of Dogville a blight on the world and assents when The Boss gives the order to kill them and to burn the town to the ground, just as Jehovah did with the flood and in Sodom and Gomorrah. Grace herself executes Tom, remarking immediately afterward to The Boss, “Some things you have to do yourself,” which may well be another reference to Jehovah. And then, in what is almost a Hollywood ending, Jehovah and the reformed Christ drive off together, presumably to reign rigorously ever after.

---

5 Compare the Jewish story of God’s freeing the Jews from Egypt. As the Haggadah tells it, God says to Moses: "In that night I will pass through the land of Egypt, and I will smite every first-born in the land of Egypt, from man to beast, and I will carry out judgments against all the gods of Egypt; I am the Lord." [The Haggadah continues with Talmudic commentators on this passage:] "I will pass through the land of Egypt," I and not an angel; "and I will smite every first-born in the land of Egypt," I and not a seraph; "and I will carry out judgments against all the gods of Egypt," I and not a messenger; "I am the Lord," it is I, and none other!

Note also that most of those Egyptian first-borns were innocent of any wrongdoing. Jehovah didn’t seem to mind a lot of collateral damage, any more than he did in the flood or in destroying Sodom and Gomorrah. This is not a god of love and forgiveness.
CHAPTER 2
THE GODLESS ALTERNATIVE

The ending of Dogville as interpreted here gives us a contrast between two different kinds of god. They are both the monotheist God of Abraham and the Judeo-Christian tradition. But one, which I call Jehovah or the Old Testament God, is focused on human action, human behavior, on obeying His rules, and on reward or punishment in this life; the other, which I call the New Testament God, or Christ, still has His rules but is more focused on belief, on faith, on mutual love between God and humanity, on forgiveness, and on rewards or punishment in an afterlife.

The western tradition from ancient Greece right up to the present offers us a third, very different set of answers to the ubiquitous questions about “who am I, how did I get here, what is the meaning of it all and of my life in particular, how should I live, what is virtue?” This third way as defined here includes many variants, with significant differences among them, but for our purposes it is their similarities that matter. This third way includes:

- Hellenic story tellers and philosophers from thousands of years ago, e.g. Homer.

- (Some but not all of the) Enlightenment philosophes in 18th century western Europe; e.g. David Hume. Existentialists from Nietzsche to Sartre, Camus, and others.

- Twentieth century psychologists from Freud and Becker to Fromm and others.

- The “human potential” and similar mid- and late-20th century movements of Maslow, Erhard and others.
These points of view have in common that there is no god (or at least, not one that matters very much). They see and preach humans as created without meaning or mission, and as dependent on their own wills, skills, and backbone to meet whatever fate presents them with. Action is all, belief or faith is nothing (or worse), meaning and virtue are created by meeting the challenges of life well, and any results, good or bad, come in this life, which is all there is.

Many atheists or agnostics in western society may not follow, or even be aware of, these thinkers and their points of view. They may range from man-in-the-street doubters to scientists and scholars, and from simple skeptics to committed preachers of atheism such as the “new atheist” followers of Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens and their ilk. In any case, by rejecting the prevailing Judeo-Christian God (whether the rigorous one or the forgiving one), His churches, His faiths, and His rules, these non-believers are, implicitly if not deliberately, echoing the intellectuals, philosophers, philosophas, psychologists, and hucksters who reject the Abrahamic God as “the answer” and preach their own alternatives.

I first encountered the French existentialists more than 50 years ago, around age 20. But only a few years ago, in my work at Georgetown, did I encounter the richly elaborated scheme that is the intellectual starting place of this chapter, in Francis Ambrosio’s course on Existentialism: The Human Search for Meaning (LSHV 429), and in his recorded lectures entitled Philosophy, Religion, and the Meaning of Life.
Professor Ambrosio presents two points of view, which he labels the Hellenic or the Heroic, and the Abrahamic or the Saintly. Following him (I believe accurately but of course oversimplifying here) I describe these different views as follows:

- The Hellenic or Heroic world view is that there are no supernatural beings, at least none who care about what we humans do, who love us, etc. There is no heaven or hell to reward or punish us for what we do in this lifetime; “this is all there is;” when we die we cease to exist. We are born into our situation and just have to do what we can with it; meaning and virtue come from doing it honorably, responsibly, to the best of our ability. We are stuck with fate, we struggle to do the right thing, and in doing so we create the only meaning or virtue that our life can have. The ideal is the Hero and the Hero’s ideal is to act honorably.

- The Abrahamic or Saintly world view is that there is a supernatural being who created us, who loves us, whom we can and should love, and that this mutual love, between us and God, and among us and our fellow humans, is the basis for meaning in life. This love leads God to forgive our sins and should lead us to forgive the sins of others. Our creator cares about how we live and has told us how to live, given us our ethical code. We can transcend death and achieve eternal existence in paradise if we follow that code, or even if we stray and sincerely repent. As the bumper sticker says, “Christians aren’t perfect; they’re just forgiven.” The ideal is the Saint and the Saint’s ideal is to live in a mutually loving relationship with God, with all living creatures, in modern terms indeed with the environment, the earth, and maybe even the universe(s).

But as Dogville shows us, and in spite of the well-meaning ecumenicists who keep telling us that it’s a question of “one God and the different ways we worship Him” (or, these days, maybe Her?), there is a major difference within the Abrahamic view: a rigorous, demanding Jehovah is very different from a loving, forgiving Christian God/Christ.¹ And more: what I call the Old Testament view is closer to the Heroic than to the New Testament Christian view in its central, basic conception of what constitutes

¹ Islam is completely omitted from this thesis. It would be interesting but is a different story, beyond our scope. “Abrahamic” is in this instance a misnomer; “Judeo-Christian” would be accurate.
virtue. This shows up in two dimensions: First, the emphasis in both the Hellenic and the Old Testament views is on actions: do the right thing. In the New Testament Christian view the emphasis is on feelings: believe in God and Christ, love them, and they will forgive you if you don’t do the right thing. Second, the Heroic and also the Old Testament to a great extent focus on rewards and punishments in this life while the New Testament Christian view focuses more on life after death: salvation or hell-fire.

Of course this alleged closeness of the Hellenic and Old Testament views does not mean that they are the same. Among many differences, especially in the nature of the divine, an important one here is that the followers of Jehovah are told what the right thing to do is, whereas the Hero creates his own rules (see especially Nietzsche).

In the same vein, the two different Abrahamic views have much in common. Jehovah, rule-maker and judge that He may be, also loves humanity to some extent. (According to Jewish tradition, he has chosen them as his favorites and hence takes special care of them. Talk about ignoring the facts!!) The followers of Jehovah value forgiveness too, just not as much as Christians. Just as the Christian “Lord’s Prayer” has us say “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,” Jews who pray to God on the annual Day of Judgment (Yom Kippur) to forgive their sins have the custom of approaching any member of the congregation with whom they’ve fought or been wronged by, and shaking hands, on the idea that if they don’t forgive each other, how can they ask God to forgive them?

But these qualifications don’t contradict our observation that the Old Testament story about the relationship of God and humanity differs from that of the New
Testament God and Christ in that the Old Testament Jehovah isn’t very loving. I had
planned on a long list of details from the Bible to provide support for this allegation but
happily found this tedious job already done for me in Miles’ *God: A Biography.*

Miles’ first seven chapters describe God’s character as described in the Torah and the
early prophets. In Chapter 8 he takes a break from the book-by-book organization and
focuses on one issue: “Does God Love?” His answer is:

> Until this point [i.e. the later prophets] in his [sic] history, the Lord God has
> never loved… He has been wrathful, vengeful, and remorseful. But he has not
> been loving… The…Mosaic covenant was… a fierce mutual loyalty binding
> liege and vassal [rather] than any gentler emotion. (Miles 1996, 237)

Examining God’s attitude towards the plight of the Jews as slaves in Egypt, as
described in Exodus, Miles observes:

> God is not moved by their condition. He does not grieve for their condition. He
> merely knows their condition… [t]he sense of abstention from emotion is
> inescapable here. Classical Hebrew has abundant resources for the expression
> of emotion, and this passage declines to draw on them. It is no exaggeration to
> say that, to judge from the entire text of the Bible from Genesis 1 through Isaiah
> 39, the Lord does not know what love is… In the main, God’s character is, page
> after page, book after book, one of impervious impassivity, frequently
> interrupted by rage. (Ibid., 239-240)

This complete absence of any show of God’s love for man is broken in Isaiah.

But the rest of the Tanakh, even in its poetic parts and in the further stories about God

---

2 Miles, now a free-lance writer, is a former Jesuit who studied at the Pontifical Gregorian
University in Rome, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and Harvard where he earned a PhD in Near
Eastern languages. Thanks to Professor Tanya Luhrmann who put me on to this book.

3 The Jewish Bible, referred to in Hebrew as the Tanakh, is similar but not identical in
coverage to the “Old Testament” as defined by various Christian sects. As Miles notes, the Tanakh can
be listed in its major parts as (1) Torah: the five books of Moses; (2) the early prophets: Joshua, Judges,
Samuel, and Kings; (3) the later prophets: the others; and (4) Writings: poetry, stories, and later history.
As Miles shows, there is a little bit of love from God in the latter two parts but absolutely none, zero, not
a whiff, in the former two.
saving his chosen people, particularly in Esther, there is little expression or sign of love. Rather, as Miles observed regarding the earlier books, it is a matter of a covenant, a deal. Follow my rules, worship me and no other gods, and I’ll take care of you. It’s not love, it’s a contract. Worse, God breaks this contract again and again.

A congruent view is expressed by the late Joseph Campbell, the famous scholar of myths, who speaks of having just bought a computer and says “… I am rather an authority on gods, so I identified with [the computer] – it seems to me to be an Old Testament god with a lot of rules and no mercy” (Campbell 1988, 24).

Most Jews, the followers of the Old Testament Jehovah, do not get the meaning of their lives from a mutually loving relationship with God and with their fellow humans. The Hasidim may be a partial exception. The meaning of a Jew’s relationship with God is to obey the rules, and to be rewarded or punished accordingly, and in this life. The picture of a Jew driving a car with a bumper sticker that says “Jews aren’t perfect, they’re just forgiven” is not believable.\textsuperscript{4} A high compliment from one Jew about another is “he’s a mensch!” It means that he does the right thing. It certainly doesn’t mean “he’s a saint” or even that he’s pious, goes to the synagogue regularly, or even that he actively believes in God. Exaggerating a bit, it is suggestive of why Athena likes Odysseus; it’s a start towards Nietzsche’s \textit{übermensch}.

So this thesis, which began about differences between the Old Time, Old Testament, Jehovah-centered religion on the one hand and the New Testament, Christian-centered one on the other, has to be extended to take into account a

\textsuperscript{4} A bumper sticker often seen where I live in rural southern Maryland says this of Christians.
trichotomy, with the Hellenic/heroic/existential at one end (there is no God; *debruillez-vous*)\(^5\) and the New Testament/Christ at the other (God loves you, forgives you and will give you eternal life in paradise if you believe in him). The Old Testament/Jehovah is somewhere in between (follow God’s rules and maybe he will let you live a little bit longer and enjoy a little bit better life here on earth.

\(^5\) “Take care of yourself” or “do your job” in French, in the sense of “don’t expect anyone else to do it for you”.
CHAPTER 3

SOME OTHER CONCEPTS OF GOD AND MAN
IN THE WESTERN TRADITION

So far we have seen a difference between an Old Testament, follow-my-rules-or-else, rigorous Jehovah, and a New Testament, loving and forgiving Christ. We then broadened the field considerably with a third view, the Heroic you’re-on-your-own view, with no god either rigorous or forgiving. In this chapter we discuss some variants of those three points of view, bringing in some of the time and space dimensions of their competition and development. It’s a story about important steps in the evolution of Western thought about God and religion.

Most of this chapter is about different movements, different schools of thought: the Reformation, the Enlightenment, existentialism, 20th century psychoanalysis, the “human potential” movement, and finally Evangelical Protestantism in the USA. Some of these are rebellions against religion, while some are reforms within it (see Hirschman 1970). The first stop is not a movement but rather a justly famous snippet of 19th century fiction, which gives a different kind of Dogville twist on the moral responsibility of God and His Church to us poor humans.

Christ and the Grand Inquisitor

In the Grand Inquisitor episode in The Brothers Karamazov Dostoevsky has one of the brothers, Ivan, an atheist and rationalist, mocking his religious (and naïve?) younger brother Alyosha. Ivan first mentions, by way of introduction, a story in which the Virgin Mary visits hell and is shocked by the terrible tortures she sees being
inflicted on the damned. She pleads with God to pardon them; He recalls the crucifixion of Her son and says “How can I forgive His executioners?” Mary continues to plead for mercy for the sinners, and finally God gives in just a little bit, granting them a brief respite from their tortures. At this the damned sing out “Thou art right, O Lord, very right, Thou hast condemned us justly” (Dostoevsky 2009, 9). So in this introductory story Dostoevsky gives us something similar to *Dogville*: the appropriateness of rigor rather than forgiveness; although it is the Virgin Mary rather than Christ who wants the rigorous Jehovah to forgive the sinners.

Ivan then proceeds to his own fable: Christ appears on earth, in Spain at the time of the Inquisition when “… for the greater glory of God, stakes were flaming all over the country…” (Ibid., 11). He appears “silently and unannounced” but the people recognize him; they pray for help and he performs a miracle, bringing a dead child back to life. The Grand Inquisitor appears, orders Christ’s arrest, and the people “… without one breath of protest…” (Ibid., 15) defer to the Inquisitor. The rest of the episode consists almost entirely of a monologue in which the Grand Inquisitor talks to Christ, his prisoner; Christ remains silent throughout.

The Grand Inquisitor seems angry, and a bit defensive. He rants. He claims that Christ delegated all power to the Pope and therefore should stay away and not interfere with what the Church does. And what is it that this Church does? It has “conquered and subjected” humanity, reversed Christ’s admonition that “the truth shall make you free,” and “for the good of mankind” has welcomed the peoples’ delivering their freedom into [the Church’s] hands.
For never was there anything more unbearable to the human race than personal freedom!” [The people] are vicious and rebellious, but we [the Church] will force them into obedience…They will … be grateful to those who have consented to lead the masses and bear their burden of freedom by ruling over them… Then we will tell them that it is in obedience to Thy will and in Thy name that we rule over them. We will deceive them once more and lie to them once again – for never, never more will we allow Thee to come among us. (Ibid., 18-25.)(

Ivan’s fable continues with more denigration of the courage of men and women, and more proud admissions of conspiring to dominate them by the Church, until it hits a new high on page 35. Continuing to upbraid Christ for “interfering” with the work of the Church, the Grand Inquisitor says:

How should I conceal from Thee our secret? If perchance Thou wouldst hear it from my own lips, then listen: We are not with Thee, but with him, and that is our secret! For centuries have we abandoned Thee to follow him, yes – eight centuries. Eight hundred years now since we accepted from him the gift rejected by Thee with indignation; that last gift which he offered Thee from the high mountain when, showing all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them, he saith unto Thee: ‘All these things will I give Thee, if Thou will fall down and worship me!’ We took Rome from him… and declared ourselves alone the kings of this earth…though our work is not yet fully accomplished… Why didst Thou reject the offer? By accepting from the powerful spirit his third offer Thou would have realized every aspiration man seeketh for himself on earth; man would have found a constant object for worship; one to deliver his conscience up to, and one that should unite all together into one common and harmonious ant-hill…. (Ibid., 35-36)

The Church has sold out to Satan. In return for worldly power (which Satan offered to Christ who rejected the deal), the Church has betrayed the true Christian ideal of freely sought and freely given grace and instead demanded unthinking submission from its parishioners. The Grand Inquisitor continues in the same vein:

Under our rule and sway all will be happy… They will convince themselves of our rightness… Liberty, Freedom of Thought and Conscience, and Science will lead them into … impassable chasms… But we will gather the sheep once more
and subject them to our will for ever… they will become timid and obedient, and gather around us as chickens around their hen… Gradually men will begin to fear us. They will nervously dread our slightest anger, their intellects will weaken… Yes; we will make them work like slaves, but during their recreation hours they shall have an innocent child-like life, full of play and merry laughter. We will even permit them sin, for, weak and helpless, they will feel the more love for us for permitting them to indulge in it. We will tell them that every kind of sin will be remitted to them, so long as it is done with our permission…. (Ibid., 39-40; emphasis added)

So Dostoevsky has Christ following the Old Testament Jehovah in offering humanity free will and personal responsibility; humanity by and large too weak to accept such a reward-or-punishment world view (or so alleges the Grand Inquisitor), and the Christian Church betraying Christ (and Jehovah) by “saving” humanity from such responsibility by permitting them to sin without punishment if they adhere to the Church. Talk about a conspiracy of priests! Seems that Dostoevsky would have gotten along famously with Voltaire and agreed with his écrasez l’infame. He might have demanded a footnote from Eric Fromm, crediting him with Fromm’s basic idea in Escape From Freedom. He might even have sympathized with Daniel Dennett and the other “new atheists” of the last few decades. And he certainly would have seen the allegory in the conclusion of Dogville.

Dogville and Dostoevsky differ in that in the latter it is not Christ, but rather the Christian Church, that abandons the Old Testament treatment of humanity with rigor and its corollary respect. In Dogville Christ is faulted for (sincere) unconditional love rather than tough love, forgiving sinners rather than doing anything to reform or punish them, and asking nothing in return, while in Dostoevsky the Church is faulted for (cynically) offering humans a crutch for their moral failings in return for their
obedience and its corollary the power of the Church. The point for this thesis is that both stories imply that a self-respecting person would reject both the easy love of *Dogville’s* Christ and the crutch of Dostoevsky’s Church, in favor of some other world view that could be that of the Old Testament, or the Hellenic/Heroic, or something else. Humans who want to be autonomous and are ready to accept both freedom and responsibility\(^1\) are in these views disrespected by both points of view, the over-indulgent all-forgiving Christ and the cynical power-hungry Church.

**The Reformation and Predestination\(^2\)**

This enormous, world-changing, and infinitely faceted subject has only one aspect that is relevant for this thesis, but it is a very important one. (See *e.g.* MacCulloch’s 700+ pages of small print for one attempt to tell the main story.) My goal here is nothing close to summarizing or mastering its complexities, including its many significant internal contradictions. Rather, I risk the other extreme of perhaps oversimplifying, and (worse or better) presenting my own amateur views.

Based on the scholarship of MacCulloch and what I have learned from various forgotten sources throughout my life, the most important causes of the Protestant

---

\(^1\) The phrase “freedom and (or ‘with’) responsibility” crops up everywhere. As an undergraduate at Cornell I found it printed on my student ID card. I found other colleges that used it as well at the time (can’t remember which). At the time I thought it was a deliberate contrast to high school where both were strictly limited. If higher education sixty years ago followed what is here called the Old Testament paradigm, earlier education today seems to follow *Dogville’s* Christ paradigm of very little responsibility and very much forgiveness (excepting a few sins of Political Incorrectness that were seen as (perhaps too) trivial in my day and are now (perhaps too seriously) grounds for suspension.) Memes can and do change extremely rapidly.

\(^2\) I am especially deeply indebted to Arnold Bradford for help with this and the following section. Nevertheless, any remaining errors or misinterpretations are, here and throughout this thesis, my responsibility.
Reformation, and why it was not stillborn like many other rebellions against the Church in those times, are three. One was the evident corruption and hypocrisy of the Catholic Church at the time, and the reactionary nature of its leaders to criticism. The then-recent “Great Schism” of the two rival Popes doubtless contributed to this lack of respectability. The second was the desire for power, and independence from the sovereignty of the Pope and his administration, of the leaders of the reform. There was a great resentment of the Church meddling in local politics and siphoning off local revenues. The imposition of celibacy for all priests may have strengthened the desire of some of them for independence from Rome. The third was the fashioning by those leaders of a product that, by accident and/or by design, was more appealing to actual and potential parishioners. Protestantism was a marketing success. Martin Luther was, among many other things, the Steve Jobs of his time and place.  

A fourth factor, not a “main reason” but perhaps crucial as a facilitator and as a determinant of timing, was the invention of the printing press and the spread of books and literacy. Before this there was no effective way to spread competing ideas outside the Church, because books were expensive and rare, and few outside the church could read them anyway.

The Reformation came to include an important, and a curious, modification of the existing love-and-forgiveness teachings of the Catholic Church. It did not, not at

---

3 MacCulloch gives a nice history of the crisis years 1517-1521 on pages 123-132. Entitled “An Accidental Revolution,” this section seems to show, although not to explain, how unplanned and surprising to both sides was Luther’s break from the Church. MacCulloch notes, here as elsewhere, Luther’s insistence that good (or bad) deeds had nothing to do with salvation, and the intellectual and political problems to which this belief led.
all, go back to the rigorous, follow-the-rules-or-else stance of the Old Testament Jehovah. Perhaps if Martin Luther or John Calvin had seen *Dogville*, history might have been different… But there was a problem with the existing concept of original sin, and its implications for salvation. The Catholics had never been able to deal really well with the logical contradictions it entailed. Luther, Calvin and Co. kept the concept but changed some of its implications in ways that, as I argue in Chapter 4, didn’t improve matters much.

There were at least two different concepts of original sin around. One concept is based on Adam and Eve’s fall from grace by disobeying God’s commands in the garden of Eden. A second concept includes this first “original” sin but adds a second sin, “original” in that it is inborn and unavoidable in all of us. It is not just something that an alleged, long-ago ancestor did, but rather is personal to each and every one of us, and unavoidable. Various Christian sects have had different theologies about this matter at different times: for instance it may be something like the iconic “seven deadly sins,” or it may be a more general inherent inability to obey God’s rules. Whatever its content, the latter concept of original (or maybe better, inherent) sin because we are all born with sinful desires seems to have been a contribution of The Reformation.

Both the Catholics and the reforming Protestants taught that every human being was born with whatever this original sin consisted of, and that only through the grace of God/Christ could a person be absolved of it and enter paradise after death. The Catholic Church taught, and still teaches, that a person’s deeds are important in the

---

determination of whether his/her soul will go to paradise or to eternal damnation. The Protestant reformers rejected the cause-effect part of the Catholic view of good deeds and redemption, and taught that whether or not a soul would be saved was predetermined (at conception, or even at the creation of the world) and that good (or bad) deeds could not alter it. Indeed Luther taught that good deeds were the result of having been predestined for grace, reversing the more common and common-sensical cause-effect view.\textsuperscript{5,6} The many variations over time and across sects are far beyond our interest (or my competence) here; the point is that both Catholics on the one hand, and Lutheran and Calvinist reformers on the other, agree(d) that belief in and love for God/Jesus, and sincere repentance for sins actually committed, were essential to salvation, but for at least some Protestants these were and are not sufficient. Catholics could assure their salvation by their behavior; at least some Protestants could not.

I am probably treading on already excessively well-trodden ground here but it seems evident that at least one reason why Luther, Calvin, and their ilk promulgated this idea was as a part of their larger movement to reduce the influence, the power, of the priesthood. They wanted, and preached, a more intimate, more direct connection between humans and the Divine, and predestination seems one way to get that: no priest could absolve the sinner, no middleman, no Pope. Only the divine God/Christ could do it.

\textsuperscript{5} Cf. Samuel Butler’s 19\textsuperscript{th} century satire \textit{Erewhon}, in which people who contract disease are arrested, tried and sent to jail, while people who steal, kill, \textit{etc}. are pitied as we pity the sick and are treated by the equivalent of our medical men.

\textsuperscript{6} Some Protestant reformers who did believe in predestination to salvation did not believe in predestination to damnation; only bad deeds, unrepentant, would cause this result.
The Enlightenment

Here again we have a many-faceted, complicated, full of internal differences, revolution. Most of the founders of the United States of America were disciples of it, and the model of Western government reflects its points of view in many respects, not least in the reduction of the power of religious institutions, especially the linked powers of monopoly of religion and the churches’ powers in civil affairs. The Enlightenment made it more respectable, more common, and indeed admirable or even necessary in some circles, to doubt most or all of the prevailing Christian theology and indeed all theologies, as well as the personnel, institutions, rituals, and indeed the essential legitimacy of established churches. Not all the philosophes rejected all aspects of religion, but the movement as a whole strongly promoted critical thinking (*sapere aude*, dare to know, became a sort of motto), personal choice of religious tenets (cf. the modern “two from A and three from B” Chinese restaurant menu analogy to the multitude of Jewish practices in the USA), and thus pluralism on the religious dimension of society. The rediscovery and recognition of some of the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers played an important role in this. It marked a return to (or at least towards) what I have called here (again after Professor Ambrosio) the Heroic view of man and god: One of the two volumes of Peter Gay’s classic survey of this revolution is subtitled “The Rise of Modern Paganism.”

The two final sections of Gay’s book (Gay 1966, 371-419) treat what may be seen as two bookends of this rejection of the Judeo-Christian God, and most especially of the religions, with their priests, institutions, and rituals that had been formed around
that concept. Gay’s bookend in the past is the Roman poet-philosopher Titus Lucretius Carus, and the other, towards the end of the Enlightenment, is David Hume.\footnote{The account to follow omits an infinitude of other relevant enlightenment thinkers and thoughts. Many, perhaps most prominent \textit{philosophes} scorned organized religion, but were deists of one sort or another: \textit{e.g.} Voltaire who in spite of his scathing critiques of religion and of Religions was a believer in some kind of “nature’s god.”}

Lucretius’ only surviving work is the Latin poem \textit{De Rerum Natura} – \textit{On the Nature of Things}. It was written in the first century BC, virtually lost until the discovery of a manuscript in a Swiss monastery in the fifteenth century (see Greenblatt’s \textit{The Swerve} for a wonderful account), unsuccessfully suppressed, on and off, by some Roman Catholic authorities thereafter, and finally became important enough as a basis for Enlightenment thought in the eighteenth century for Gay to make it the theme of his penultimate section of his last chapter. The poem presents and extends the thought of Lucretius’ predecessor (by four centuries) Epicurus. It is an astonishingly (to use Greenblatt’s word) modern view of physics, astronomy, evolution, atheism, and antagonism to all religion, superstition, and beliefs not based on actual observation of natural phenomena (see pages 182-202 for a summary of all this and more). Most importantly for us, it followed Epicurus in advocating a life based on seeking pleasure \textit{in the here and now}. The important part is not “pleasure,” which for Epicurus and Lucretius did not mean license, disregard of society or the exploitation of others, but rather the “here and now,” and without worrying about any alleged rules of
any alleged supernatural being, or about any alleged punishment or reward in an alleged afterlife (of all of which Lucretius explicitly denied the existence).\textsuperscript{8,9}

Thus the moral content of \textit{De Rerum Natura} went back to before the New, and even the Old Testament. There was no loving Christ to forgive non-existent sin (since without the sin, no forgiveness is needed!), no rigorous Jehovah with meaningless or arbitrary rules, and certainly no priests or churches. Lucretius was a prequel to Nietzsche’s \textit{übermensch} making his own rules, and to the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century Hippie yelling: “Do it now!”

Gay’s other bookend on the Enlightenment as “modern paganism” is David Hume. Hume’s intelligence placed him well among the \textit{philosophes}, but what set him apart, to some extent at least, was his wholehearted reliance on skepticism. Hume preached no ideology; rather he practiced doubt. His question about everything was “how do you know that?” and he did not accept faith, belief, the views of the majority, revelation, or any other answer not based on careful, confirmed observation and logical reasoning. He wielded this humble skepticism with deadly effect on religious dogma and hence on religion itself.

Hume’s works are the perfect intellectual forerunners of this thesis. As Gay points out, the “…very title… of “Hume’s \textit{Natural History of Religion} [proclaims that his purpose, as ours here], “…is to treat the sacred as a social phenomenon like any

\textsuperscript{8} Thomas Jefferson declared himself to be “…an Epicurean” (see Miller, quoted in Greenblatt (Greenblatt 2011, 263 and 326). The Wikipedia entry on the book says that “Thomas Jefferson owned at least five Latin editions and English, Italian and French translations.”

\textsuperscript{9} Lucretius did not disbelieve in gods, but thought them totally indifferent to and uninvolved in what went on in the world.
other…” In other words, to “…inquire…into the origin of religion in human nature” (Ibid., 409). Treating the whole of revealed religious faiths as groundless superstition, Hume sought [not only to debunk it but also] to explain its existence, whereas here I seek analogously to explain the differential successes and failures of some of its different variants (see his Chapter 4). Newton I am not, but I do stand on the shoulders of giants.

Hume’s skepticism and empiricism were evident in his views on religion. He was a profound agnostic, writing that he did not have enough faith to believe in the non-existence of God, given that there was no proof of such non-existence. But he attacked many aspects of religious thought. A prime instance is his refutation of the idea that persists today as “intelligent design:” that the beauty, complexity, and interactive workings of the universe prove that it cannot be the result of random processes, but rather must have been designed, presumably by some divine, conscious, willful entity. Hume showed how many complex and beautiful things arose without design, such as snowflakes, and he anticipated Darwin’s principle of natural selection by noting that the fact that some life form seems very well adapted to its environment does not show that it was so designed, but rather that if it were not so well adapted it would not exist; i.e. that those life forms that are, or become, adapted are the only ones that survive and therefore the only ones we see; other, mal-adapted ones have disappeared.

Another important aspect of Hume’s arguments about religion was the application of an Occam’s razor to religious revelations. Miracles, for example, defined as “a violation of the laws of nature (Hume 1939, 656),” are dissected by Hume in his
An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding. Through a series of logical and factual arguments, Hume demonstrates that the miraculous claims of religion are extremely unlikely to ever have occurred, and by their common use to support contradictory faiths shown to be themselves, taken as a whole, to be contradictory (Ibid., 661). Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, an adage that goes back at least to Hume’s contemporary the French mathematical genius Laplace (“The weight of the evidence should be proportioned to the strangeness of the facts”) and popularized by Carl Sagan 10 200 years later. Hume used the same rule to argue that the evidence for the extraordinary claims of the Judeo-Christian stories was far from extraordinarily strong, in fact was extraordinarily weak, and therefore not credible to any “wise man” (Ibid., 653). To believe that a miracle actually happened, wrote Hume, one would have to believe that the possibility that the story was false was even more miraculous than the miracle. And without its miracles, where and what is the Christian religion? Or the Jewish? The verdict of The Enlightenment is: sources of useful morality, certainly, but in their theologies and alleged revelations nothing but superstition, folk tales, tools for priests and kings to use to cow their flocks.

Yet how many people still credit these stories.

I cannot do better than Gay in summarizing how close Hume’s conclusions are to the Heroic (and its nieces and nephews the existentialist) points of view: “He was willing to live with uncertainty, with no supernatural justifications, no complete explanations, no promise of permanent stability… and … without complaining, a

cheerful Stoic… Hume makes plain that since God is silent, man is his own master; he must… make his own way” (Ibid., 418-419).

**Existentialists**

Friedrich Nietzsche famously proclaimed “God is dead” in 1882, thus scooping by more than 80 years *Time* magazine’s cover story with the same announcement. This inspired, difficult, confused, and ultimately insane inventor (coiner?) of the “übermensch” is often seen as the first existentialist. He followed and extended the Heroic paradigm of man on his own, master of his own fate if he can but gather the courage to do so. If the motto of The Enlightenment was “Dare to Know,” one could say that Nietzsche’s was “Dare to Do [on your own].”

Nietzsche prequels the ending of *Dogville* in his scorn for the all-forgiving, pitying nature of Grace before her conversion back to the Old Testament stance:

In *The Antichrist, Curse on Christianity* (*Der Antichrist. Fluch auf das Christentum*, September 1888 [published 1895]), Nietzsche expresses his disgust over the way noble values in Roman Society were corrupted by the rise of Christianity, and he discusses specific aspects and personages in Christian culture — the Gospels, Paul, the martyrs, priests, the crusades — with a view towards showing that Christianity is a religion for weak and unhealthy people, whose general historical effect has been to undermine the healthy qualities of the more noble cultures…. Some interpret Nietzsche's title for his book as meaning, “the Antichristian.” It should be noted that in an 1883 letter to his friend, Peter Gast [Johann Heinrich Köselitz], Nietzsche does describe himself self-entertainingly as “the Antichrist,” and also more seriously as “the most terrible opponent of Christianity.”

---

11 The Beatles joined the two with “know” and “do” in plastic letters several feet high in their movie *Yellow Submarine*. This good advice was reproduced in the same form in Peoples’ Park in Berkeley in the late 1960s. Neither Nietzsche nor the ‘60s were all about nihilism.

12 This and the following excerpt are from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on Nietzsche, [http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche) (accessed 20 November 2012).
He follows Epicurus and Lucretius:

Nietzsche describes himself as “a follower of the philosopher Dionysus” in *Ecce Homo, How One Becomes What One Is* (*Ecce Homo, Wie man wird, was man ist*, October-November 1888) — a book in which he examines retrospectively his entire corpus, work by work… After examining each of his published works, Nietzsche concludes *Ecce Homo* with the section, “Why I Am a Destiny.” He claims that he is a destiny because he regards his anti-moral truths as having the annihilating power of intellectual dynamite; he expects them to topple the morality born of sickness which he perceives to have been reigning within Western culture for the last two thousand years. In this way, he expresses his hope that Dionysus, the god of life's exuberance, would replace Jesus, the god of the heavenly otherworld, as the premier cultural standard for future millennia.

He echoes Dostoevsky in The Grand Inquisitor scene:  

Nietzsche claimed that the Christian faith as practiced was not a proper representation of Jesus' teachings, as it forced people merely to believe in the way of Jesus but not to act as Jesus did, in particular his example of refusing to judge people, something that Christians had constantly done the opposite of. He condemned institutionalized Christianity for emphasizing a morality of pity, which assumes an inherent illness in society: Christianity is called the religion of pity. Pity stands opposed to the tonic emotions which heighten our vitality: it has a depressing effect. We are deprived of strength when we feel pity. That loss of strength which suffering as such inflicts on life is still further increased and multiplied by pity. Pity makes suffering contagious.

Albert Camus, in the essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the novel *The Plague*, modified Nietzsche’s “Dare to Do” into the still-heroic but more modest “Just Do It.” Camus rejected the label “existentialist;” be that as it may, his protagonists exemplified the Heroic view of virtue, of how to live. They accepted their fates, did their best, and looked for no divine support, divine rules, salvation as a reward, or other meaning in

---

their lives beyond just living them.\textsuperscript{14} Camus’ Sisyphus, whom Camus imagines as happy with his never-ending task of rolling the boulder up the hill only to see it fall down to the bottom again, is an archetype of the Heroic idea that “meaning is simply living your life; that’s all there is; deal with it.” In \textit{The Plague}, the main protagonist Dr. Rieux stoically deals with uncontrollable and irrational nature, treating the sick and doing the best he can, less spectacularly than Odysseus and less mythically than Sisyphus, but basically just the same, just doing his job. (Prequelling Willie Loman in \textit{Death of a Salesman}?\) This “Heroic” behavior is an important part of the essence of the existentialist view of how to live, whether from Nietzsche or from his mostly-French successors in the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century. For our purposes here, the common point is that there were no gods, neither rigorous nor forgiving, in the story, and the true man, the autonomous man, the Hero, neither wanted nor needed them. I imagine that Nietzsche and Camus would have scoffed at \textit{Dogville}’s moral.

Soren Kierkegaard is also seen by some as an early existentialist, but for us he might have deserved a label of his own. Kierkegaard, like Nietzsche and so many others, examined the revelations and the dogma of the church into which he was born, and rejected them as unbelievable. Then, like some of those others, he found that he had not the strength to face life and all its mysteries alone on Nietzsche’s mountain. Far from a superman, Kierkegaard snatched defeat from the jaws of victory by leaping

\textsuperscript{14} The Hellenic/Heroic paradigm is to accept one’s fate (\textit{moira}), struggle (\textit{agon}) to do the best you can, and thus achieve virtue (\textit{arête}). “Fate” here means not some inevitable destiny in the future but rather the cards that one has been dealt, the things one can’t change. To play those cards as best one can is the only meaning of life, \textit{i.e.} the way to attain virtue.
back, embracing the church he had denied even while acknowledging his incredulity. He put faith back in the place where he had previously inserted reason. He was a proof, or at least an example *par excellence*, of the argument of Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor: he embraced Christianity because he couldn’t bear the world without it.

**Psychoanalytic Therapy and Other “Talking Cures”**

Freudian and neo-Freudian therapy is to a great extent discredited today. In its concepts it is seen as a set of theories that are at best without strong empirical support or at worst untestable and of doubtful validity, and in its practice as at best an inefficient and at worst a useless way of helping people adjust better to their lives (cf. *agon!*). The problems, say critics, lie in the chemistry of the patient, and medication to adjust that chemistry is better, not to mention quicker and cheaper, than any “talking cure.”¹⁵ But for us some of the ideas of this approach are important examples of yet one more strategy for solving the problem of life, meaning, and virtue.

As in all the other parts of this chapter, I am going to oversimplify a lot here.

Complete success of any of these therapeutic approaches would be for the patient to overcome some limitation(s), presumably self-imposed by some conscious or unconscious need, and/or past trauma, and become a self-actualizing, Nietzschean, autonomous, existentialist Hero. Not necessarily on the scale of Odysseus, maybe no better than Willy Loman, but anyway capable of getting on with life. Perhaps because

---

¹⁵ Many other therapies and counseling currently popular involve talking, with or without complementary chemical adjustments, but almost all focus mostly on the here, the now, and the surface of the patient’s problems.
such complete success is so seldom achieved, many practitioners claim a more modest goal; at the minimum extreme it may be only “to understand why I’m so screwed up.”

Wherever the goal may be on this continuum, different gurus of the movement focused on different aspects (or better, different sources) of their patients’ inability to live fulfilling lives. Freud emphasized sexual repression and inadequate maturation; Becker focused on fear of death; Fromm on fear of being alone, with no community or roots. Fear of failure must also have been the pet bête noire of many a practitioner (no double meaning intended here…), and there have undoubtedly been yet others. For Professor Ambrosio, Becker’s identification of fear of death as the problem is a metaphor for a broader fear of, or inability to live with, “finitude,” i.e. our limitations not only as to mortality but as to everything else in which we find ourselves less than omnipotent, which is of course our whole life.

The point for us is that these kinds of therapy offer (or offered) a different strategy for the individual to deal with his life. Not an Abrahamic God, whether rigorous or forgiving. Not a Jesus who simply granted you grace if you believed in Him. Not an Epicurean “don’t worry, be happy.” Not a Heroic, Nietzschean “just stand on your own two feet and do your best” model. Not even an existentialist (or New Age) “just do it.” For these analysts your moira was your neuroses, your agon took place in your mind while reclining on their couches or participating in groups of other similarly handicapped folks, and although the ultimate goal “should” logically be higher, for most patients the closest they could hope to come to arête was to understand better why they had trouble coping. The archetypical patient is Woody Allen. In its original and
highest form it was for patients not weak enough to fall back on God, not strong enough to stand on their own, with the intellect to engage in analysis, the cash to pay for it, the time to practice it, and the modesty not to expect too much from it.

**New Age Fads**

As psychoanalysis and other “talking cure” therapies lost adherents in the mid- and late-20th century, and before science and Big Pharma found chemicals that weren’t outlawed and that really did help lots of people to adjust and to live less anxious lives, the variegated “human potential” movement offered yet other lotus leaves to folks whom the contemporary American journalist Tony Schwartz called “seekers.” Seeking sex (better and/or more), meaning, authenticity, relief from physical problems, love, connection, balance, ability to commit, more intense experience, more ability to endure experience, or yet some other relief, the salesmen of this movement included serious people who wanted to help others, charlatans, and perhaps everything in between. What the followers of the many variants had (and have) in common is that (a) God and the religions around Him do not do the trick and (b) Heroism is beyond reach; something else is needed. In this important sense the movements are a substitute for god-centered religion. To the extent that these New Age activities go beyond fun and frolic, they attempt to deliver what Nietzsche and Sartre and Freud (and Zen) were all about: authenticity; be yourself, drop your pretenses; free yourself from goals and constraints that you think society imposes but that you’re better off without. Stand on your own values, create your own essence, and concern yourself with the right ways not just of
doing but also of being. As far as religion, they all have the same message: If you can accept yourself you don’t need to accept Jesus.

**Evangelistic, Born-Again American Protestantism**

What interests us here, precisely, are the Protestant branches in the United States that hold that being born-again, or some other concept that has to do with accepting Christ as one’s personal savior, is both a necessary and sufficient condition for an eternal life in paradise after death. Belief, faith, love are what count.

There are at least three commonly-used adjectives that are used to describe movements, or people, who hold this and/or similar or associated views: fundamentalist, Evangelical, and born-again. Millennials and Pentecostals might also be included. Scholars, journalists, religious authorities and lay persons refer sometimes to one, sometimes to another, of these adjectives when dealing with the phenomenon that interests us, and in secondary research such as ours it is hard to avoid using information about, e.g., “fundamentalism” or “Evangelism” even though there are some fundamentalist or Evangelicals who are not of the born-again variety. As in my professional field, economics, the available data often does not have the precise characteristics of the theory or ideas of interest, and compromises are unavoidable when using the data to describe what’s going on with the ideas or those who hold them.
Here is an excerpt of the Wikipedia entry on “born-again”:

In Christianity, to be born-again is to undergo a "spiritual rebirth"… of the human soul or spirit from the "Holy Spirit", contrasted with the physical birth everyone experiences. The origin of the term "born-again" is the New Testament: "Jesus replied, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born-again.'" It is a term associated with salvation in Christianity. Individuals who profess to be born-again often state that they have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ … Sometimes the phrase seems to be judgmental, making a distinction between genuine and nominal Christians. Sometimes … descriptive, like the distinction between liberal and conservative Christians… Furthermore, the term usually includes the notion of human choice in salvation and excludes a view of divine election by grace alone….

Although many evangelicals allow that conversion can be a process, generally they see it as a specific, identifiable moment of time when a person simply and sincerely trusts in Jesus Christ as savior. They understand Romans 10:9 to indicate a requirement of salvation: "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord', and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." So, "to be born-again" means "to be saved."…

“Evangelist” and “fundamentalist” overlap, with the latter being more militant and more separate or differentiated from the rest of society. Many Evangelist and/or fundamentalist Protestants are not “born-again” enthusiasts, but the born-again movement includes the basic tenets and points of view of fundamentalism and Evangelism. Here are excerpts from the Wikipedia page on fundamentalism:

Christian fundamentalism … refers to a movement begun in the late 19th and early 20th century British and American Protestant denominations among evangelicals who reacted energetically against theological and cultural modernism. Fundamentalists argued that 19th century modernist theologians had misinterpreted or rejected certain doctrines, especially biblical inerrancy, which evangelicals viewed as the fundamentals of Christian faith. … Scholars debate how much the terms "evangelical" and "fundamentalist" are synonymous….

Fundamentalism is a movement manifested in various denominations with various theologies, rather than a single denomination or systematic theology. It became active in the 1910s after the release of *The Fundamentals*, a ten-volume set of essays, apologetic and polemic written by conservative Protestant theologians to defend what they saw as Protestant orthodoxy. The movement became more organized in the 1920s within U.S. Protestant churches, especially Baptist and Presbyterian.

Fundamentalism is defined by historian George M. Marsden in his seminal work *Fundamentalism and American Culture* as "militant anti-modernist Protestant evangelicalism." Marsden explains that Christian fundamentalists were American evangelical Christians who in the 20th century opposed "both modernism in theology and the cultural changes that modernism endorsed. Militant opposition to modernism was what most clearly set off fundamentalism….

In the 1940s the more moderate faction of fundamentalists (or 'postfundamentalists') maintained the same theology but began calling themselves "evangelicals" to stress their less militant position. … Most postfundamentalist evangelicals do not wish to be called fundamentalists, even though their basic theological orientation is not very different. A key event … was the formation of the National Association of evangelicals in 1942. … Beginning in the 1940s.....militant and separatist evangelicals came to be called fundamentalists, while culturally engaged and non-militant evangelicals were supposed to be called evangelicals… The broader term "evangelical" includes fundamentalists as well as people with similar or identical religious beliefs who do not engage the outside challenge to the Bible as actively….

The born-again movement, or set of movements, is distinct in its doctrine from every other one that I have mentioned. It is most distant, of course, from atheists or agnostics, from heroics, Nietzscheans, and existentialists, and from “godless” psychiatrists, self-help and/or human potential gurus selling “authenticity.” It is pretty far from deists, and almost as far from the skeptics of the Enlightenment. It says it worships “the same God” as do the Jews, but as we have seen this god has lots of different rules or lack of same, and it focuses almost exclusively on the afterlife and on the importance of belief, whereas Old Testament Judaism focuses almost exclusively in
life here on earth and on deeds. It is closer to “main line” Protestantism, but differs as to predestination (whatever traces of that doctrine may still be believed) and/or the overriding importance of actions as opposed to beliefs. It is also distinct from Roman Catholicism, not only in its doctrine about salvation but also, very much, in its abhorrence of hierarchy and dogma handed down from Rome, and insistence on the freedom, indeed the necessity, of each individual to accept the Bible as the inerrant literal word of God and to have a personal relationship with that God, without any intercession from clergy. What really sets it apart is our criterion: if you are born-again, you will be saved; if not, you will not.

**Summary**

The points of view mentioned in this chapter can be grouped into four:

- Dostoevsky in *The Grand Inquisitor* episode gives us a different wrinkle on the *Dogville* view. Here it is not Jehovah vs. Christ but rather the Christian Church vs. Christ, where Christ is more or less like Jehovah in *Dogville*, i.e. teaching that humans are responsible for their actions, and the Church has (hypocritically) become like Christ in *Dogville*, adopting the stance of forgiveness; humans can’t help behaving badly. The story’s implicit vote is for the same kind of human-divine relationship as that of *Dogville*: a rigorous God who is more about respect than about love and forgiveness.

- The Protestant Reformation retains the loving Christian God but makes two changes that are relevant here: it rejects the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church in favor of a more direct relationship between humans and Christ/God, and (at least originally) it claimed that one’s fate after death is predetermined. Good deeds aren’t sufficient to enjoy eternal paradise; the grace of God is also required and can’t be affected by one’s deeds in this life.

- The Enlightenment, Nietzsche, the French existentialists, psychoanalysis, the mid-20th century human potential movement are all partial, more modern versions of the Heroic view. Abandon superstition, God either doesn’t exist or doesn’t care about you, take care of yourself, this life is all there is, the only meaning to it is how you live it. If you need help in this stark universe, and
sipping espresso at Aux Deux Magots isn’t an option or isn’t sufficient, you can pay a psychiatrist, or Esalen, or Werner Erhard, Tony Robbins or one of their ilk to coach you.

- Born-again Protestantism goes way back, really to the Reformation. There is a God, He does love you and forgive you, but a hierarchy such as the Roman Catholic Church only gets in the way. Unlike Reformation doctrine, however, your afterlife is not predestined but depends on you: Accept Christ as your savior, let him into your daily life, and you will enjoy eternal paradise after death. And, as icing on this lovely cake, nobody who doesn’t do all that, no matter how well they behave otherwise, will get into that paradise with you.18

---

18 This last sentence sounds nastier than born-again Christians deserve. They expend considerable energy in proselytizing, in some cases perhaps sparked by a profit motive on the part of the preachers but no doubt in most cases sparked by a sincere desire to “spread the good news” and help others avoid hell-fire. Yet I cannot convince myself that this version of being the exclusively “chosen people” does not increase the attractiveness of the born-again meme.
CHAPTER 4

MEMES, MARKETING, AND
THE EVOLUTION OF RELIGION IN THE WEST

In this final chapter we try to understand something of the appearance, disappearance, changes, waxing and waning of the different points of view about “God and Man” discussed earlier.

Darwin, Dawkins, and the Evolution of Ideas

Darwin’s paradigm of evolution by natural selection, sometimes labeled “survival of the fittest,” has been called “the best idea anyone ever had” (by Daniel Dennett). I call it a paradigm because (a) it is not a testable hypothesis and therefore should not strictly be called a theory, and (b) since it has become the foundation for biology and is becoming an important part of the foundations for psychology, sociology, and perhaps even philosophy, it seems too important, too revolutionary and too broad in its applicability, to call it by its usual label, a “principle.”

Survival of the fittest is not testable because it is circular: the only way to measure what is “fittest” is to see what survives. (See Brandon, Chapter 1, for a fuller exposition.) The proposition states that if a particular set of conditions are satisfied, evolution by natural selection will occur. (See e.g. Brandon 1996, Chapter One and especially pages 5-6.) These conditions are usually stated as:

- **Variation**: the entities in question must not be identical. Living organisms vary because of mutations, individual variations inherent in sexual reproduction, and other causes.

- **Heritability**: at least some of the variation must persist. In living organisms, this heritability is over generations.
Differential survivability, driven by differential adaptability and competition for scarce resources: At least some of the variation must result in differences among individuals as to their ability to survive long enough to reproduce, and resources must be scarce enough that not all of them survive that long. A prime resource for living entities is food.

In his famous book, *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins argued that “…the fundamental unit of selection… is not the species, nor the group, nor even, strictly, the individual. It is the gene…” (Dawkins 1989, 11). He tells a story of the origin of life that starts, in the inevitable primordial soup, with random formation of many different molecules (variation) that one day leads to the accidental formation of one that can produce copies of itself (heritability). He posits competition for building materials (other molecules that are components; perhaps energy although he doesn’t mention that) that completes the triad that is the basis for the Darwinian evolution of these molecules that produce copies of themselves. He calls these molecules “replicators.” He ends this story in the last paragraph of his Chapter 2 as follows:

Was there to be any end to the gradual improvement in the techniques and artifices used by the replicators to ensure their own continuation in the world? There would be plenty of time for improvement. What weird engines of self-preservation would the millennia bring forth? Four thousand million years on, what was to be the fate of the ancient replicators? They did not die out, for they are past masters of the survival arts. But do not look for them floating loose in the sea; they gave up that cavalier freedom long ago. Now they swarm in huge colonies, safe inside gigantic lumbering robots, sealed off from the outside world, communicating with it by tortuous indirect routes, manipulating it by remote control. They are in you and in me, they created us, body and mind, and their preservation is the ultimate rationale for our existence. They have come a long way, these replicators. Now they go by the name of genes, and we are their survival machines. (Ibid., 19-20)

Thus answering for all time the riddle of the chicken and the egg…
Another pair of Dawkin’s concepts that is important for this thesis is that of “gene complexes” and “co-evolution.” He notes that a crucial part of a gene’s environment is the other genes in the creature’s genome, and that many genes would not survive in different genomes. Genes for stomachs that can digest meat need a genome that contains genes that design sharp teeth, to use a banal example. More subtly, a gene that might not survive in the genome where it first appears might do better if a second mutation occurs that renders the first one more useful. The generalization is that genes evolve in part through interaction with other genes (“co-evolution”), and that successful combinations of different genes (“gene complexes”) can themselves become long-term surviving units.

Dawkins’ main objective with the book was to attempt to explain apparent acts of altruism, which seem to go against the “survival of the fittest” idea. That interesting and important discussion, which continues to this day, does not concern us here. The main thing that does, in addition to the basics that were just described, is a chapter that did not appear in the first edition, but was added, essentially as a digression, to the second edition, published in 1989 (and to all others). It is Chapter 11, titled “Memes: The New Replicators.”

---

1 In the early 21st century there have appeared several famous books (including one by Dawkins) that build on Dawkins’ concept to analyze religion – mostly in ways varying from skeptical to nasty. In fact the sum of these books has been labeled “the new atheism.” Some of the content of this thesis is present in some of these books. But for the most part I don’t cite them at specific places because I didn’t get one single one of the ideas in this thesis from these books. Rather, together with those authors I have reasoned from the works that I do cite. The books include Dawkins’ The God Delusion as well as several by Pascal Boyer, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and the late Christopher Hitchens. See the Bibliography.
Dawkins asks, “what … is so special about genes?” and answers “…they are replicators” (Ibid., 191). He continues: “I think that a new kind of replicator has recently emerged on this very planet. It is staring us in the face. It is still in its infancy, still drifting clumsily about in its primeval soup, but already it is achieving evolutionary change at a rate that leaves the old gene panting far behind. The new soup is … human culture” and for the entities that are allegedly evolving in it Dawkins coins the word “meme” explaining that memes can be, for example, “… tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches… [and] God” (Ibid., 192).

Dawkins speculates (his word) that since ideas satisfy the three conditions of Darwinian evolution, “survival of the fittest” may apply to ideas and culture, just as it does to genes, gene complexes, and their “survival machines” i.e. living organisms. These ideas, these memes, live in the medium of human culture(s). It might be said that culture is the sum total of all our memes that have survived to the current moment. The “survival machines” for these pieces of culture would include, e.g., religions and their institutions (i.e. churches), beliefs, and rituals, as well as civic ethics and the social structures, laws, constitutions, and governments that apply, perpetuate, and change those memes.

Of particular further interest for us is Dawkins’ short discussion of “co-adapted meme complexes” and “evolutionarily stable strategies.”

In the case of genes, …co-adapted … complexes may arise; [for example a] large set of genes concerned with mimicry in butterflies became tightly linked together on the same chromosome, so tightly that they can be considered as one gene. [An example of] the more sophisticated idea of the evolutionarily stable set of genes …[is], mutually suitable teeth, claws, guts and sense organs evolved
in carnivore gene pools, while a different stable set of characteristics emerged in herbivore gene pools. Does anything analogous occur in meme pools? Has the god meme, say, become associated with other memes, and does this association assist in the survival of each? … A particular … aspect of doctrine that has been very effective in enforcing religious observance is the threat of hell fire. … It might almost have been planned deliberately by a Machiavellian priesthood trained in deep psychological indoctrination techniques [but more likely arose] … simply because it is advantageous to itself. (Ibid., 197-200, emphasis added)

In a less charitable view, early priests notice the obvious, that humans fear death and wonder what, if anything, occurs after it, and exploit this need by concocting the alternatives of eternal paradise or eternal hell-fire as a way to strengthen their own hold on the people. In this scenario these memes did not “arise” accidentally, but rather they were created on purpose but (here agreeing with Dawkins) they prospered because they were advantageous to each other and to other religion-related memes. They became a key part of a winning team, a co-adaptive meme complex in our vocabulary here. But regardless of the origins of these memes, it’s clear from the success of Christianity that the Judeo-Christian God, eternal life after death, and the alternatives for this eternity of hellfire or paradise are a very “stable, co-adapted meme complex.”

Recall that an important part of the environment of any given gene is all the other genes in the genome of the creature whose basic nature they determine. A change in one gene may affect the adaptedness of other genes in the same organism. Analogously, important parts of the environment of any one idea are other ideas, which may and likely do affect its survival or its disappearance, or changes in its form. Examples of how changes in both ideas and other aspects of society have altered and/or
changed the usefulness of the dominant memes are easy to find:

- In the 17th and 18th century European Enlightenment, scientific progress reduced the attraction of the dominant memes of religious piety and obedience to authority, in favor of memes of rationalism and skepticism. This change was also facilitated by the rediscovery of classical “pagan” philosophical writings from ancient Greece and Rome (see e.g. Gay and Greenblatt).

- During the last 40 or 50 years globalization, in part the rapid spreading of technological progress, specialization, higher labor productivity, and higher incomes, has been increasing the fitness of societies with memes putting a higher value on education, the rule of law (especially enforcement of contracts), openness to social change, and the “work ethic,” as contrasted with those where memes still favor “knowing one’s place” and allegiance to the clan or tribe (see e.g. Fukuyama). All this has increased income disparity within and between societies; i.e. the benefits of the modern memes relative to the older ones have increased.

- The American meme of exceptionalism, which dates back to John Winthrop’s iconic sermon during early colonial times in New England, has mutated from “we must behave better than other societies because the eyes of the world, and of God, are upon us” to “whatever we do is either right because of who we are, and/or permissible because we alone have the power to do it.” This mutation was made possible by the environmental changes of ever-more-powerful weapons and the logistic ability to project power anywhere in the world. It would seem to be producing non-adaptive behavior, first in the foreign policy of the United States and now also in the terrorists who react so negatively to it.

One more concept will complete this part of the discussion: “spandrels.” The concept originated in architecture; it is a feature of a design that exists not because it is needed; rather it is an accidental or incidental result of other features that are needed. The classic example is the space under a staircase. This byproduct of the staircase often becomes a kind of closet, and thus an accidental byproduct is transformed into something useful. Attics, which exist in snowy climates in order for the roof to have a pitch so that too much snow doesn’t accumulate on it, also become storage spaces or, if
the roof is made steep enough and some dormer windows are added, bedrooms or the like.

Architectural spandrels may simply remain useless byproducts of useful features, or uses may be developed for them, or in at least a few cases they may become counter-productive. A banal example of the last is the space under arches and other decorative features of churches, which become homes for pigeons and thus a plague for those who pass by them.

The spandrel concept has been adopted by evolutionary biologists. Spandrels in living organisms, “nonadaptive side consequences” as the late Stephen Jay Gould and perhaps others have defined them² not only arise by accident but also may survive even if no uses are found for them, as long as they do little or no harm to the survivability of the other design elements that cause them. The whiteness of bones in vertebrates (a non-adaptive result of high calcium content, needed for strength), and the red color of blood (an accidental and irrelevant result of the chemistry of hemoglobin), are examples of biological spandrels that don’t affect fitness.

Just like using the space under the stairs for storage, biological spandrels may also come to be useful. Over time, a genotype that produces a nonadaptive characteristic in a creature may accidentally mutate to include another characteristic that takes advantage of the spandrel to, together, increase reproductive success. If this happens, what began as a useless accident has become adaptive, but that does not imply that it was always so. Some evolutionary biologists consider our faculty for speech to

---

be a spandrel: an accidental product of the evolution of the brain that produced other more immediately adaptive changes.

Counter-productive spandrels are much more common in biology than in architecture. (Perhaps architects are even better designers than the putative “Intelligent Designer?”) Many evolutionary outcomes have spread because they improved reproductive success in the past but, in a changed environment, no longer do so, e.g. our taste for sweets, or indeed our tendency to gluttony, which were adaptive for hunter-gatherers who found calories hard to get and sometimes even unavailable for a while, but are non-adaptive for their descendants with unfettered access to McDonald’s.

Apparently strange characteristics of organisms may also exist simply because our present state of evolution is not necessarily (yet?) perfect (!); e.g. the spines of bipeds.

The point for us is that biological (and architectural) phenotypes observed at a given time and place, e.g. here and now, may exhibit characteristics that defy any attempt to see how they contribute to reproductive success at that time and place. Such characteristics may never have been useful, they may have been useful but are no longer, or they may be a not-yet-well-evolved deficiency. Not every characteristic is a currently useful, perfectly evolved result of natural selection.

The reader will not be surprised when the discussion now moves from architecture through biology to memes. Easing into our main subject, I observed a banal instance in the alpine meme of steeply pitched roofs duplicated in German settlements in southern Brazil, where snow is unknown. The quaint alpine chateau look
is more costly than the flat roofs found just about everywhere else in Brazil, but evidently not sufficiently expensive to eliminate its deployment. Boyer would have called it a parasite that was carried to Brazil by German and Austrian immigrants and has infected their Brazilian descendants.

In biology, genes spread almost exclusively by being passed on to offspring. So gene survival is closely tied to the fitness the gene confers on its carrier, \textit{i.e.} the organism. But in society, memes can and do spread mostly across people or groups of people. Meme survival is not so closely tied to the fitness the meme confers on the individual who adopts it; rather it depends more on its appeal to individuals and (here there is no parallel in biology) to the effectiveness of its preachers. An extreme example is the meme complex that was Nazism in mid-twentieth-century Germany. These memes were disastrous to almost every individual who adopted them, within one generation. Almost none were passed to the offspring of the people who adopted them, although they continue to appear here and there, always to the detriment of the individuals or groups that adopt them (are infected by them?). But their appeal, and the skill of their salesman Adolf Hitler, promoted their rapid spread across German society.

So what this extension and analysis of spandrels tells us is that a religion may include counter-functional, formerly functional, and/or not-yet functional content.\footnote{Boyer goes so far as to label religion in general as a spandrel, meaning that its appeal to the human mind can be explained by other fitness-enhancing mental capacities.} This concept will be useful in our later analysis of the prospering and the waning of different religious memes, about God, heaven and hell, pre-destination, the literal truth of the
Bible, enforcing the rules vs. forgiving the rule-breakers, and back to the ending of

*Dogville.*

**Revealed preferences for religious memes**

An important chunk of microeconomics has as part of its foundation the idea of consumer preferences; for instance, as manifested in “demand schedules.” For 150 years or so this discussion was largely *a priori*, starting with assumptions and deriving logical conclusions. In the last half of the 20th century the profession swung towards empiricism, which included trying to learn about the actual nature of these demand schedules through measurement and experiment about what came to be called “revealed preferences,” *i.e.* how did actual people actually behave? So in this section we leave the conceptual and go to the data: how have the different ideas explored in previous chapters fared in the marketplace? How has natural selection affected religious points of view, over time and across societies?

For our purposes I choose five distinct groups of religious memes competing for hosts (forgive a bit of exaggeration and oversimplification):

- **Heroic, atheistic or strongly agnostic, Epicurean, Nietzschean, existentialist, humanist;** in short the no-god memes. Nobody up there either likes you or hates you. Stand on your own two feet (with a psychiatrist or a self-help guru or your loved ones or maybe nobody at your side). You are an unimportant accident. The only meaning of life is to live it. This life is all there is.

- **Old Testament Jehovah:** rules and rewards or punishments, mainly in this life. Follow the rules, but emphasize getting on with the rest of your life. “Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” And while you’re at it, “Fear God.”

- **New Testament Christianity:** No need to fear God (although you should obey His rules, and those of his self-appointed “servants” the clergy). He loves you,
you should love Him, and that’s the basis for all meaning in life. This life is less important than the eternity in which you will exist after death, which could be really nice or really awful. This group includes:

- **Roman Catholicism:** Follow the rules, confess and repent when you don’t, believe in the dogma, knuckle under to the Pope and all his lieutenants no matter how badly they behave, and you will have a truly wonderful time after you die.\(^4\)

- **“Mainstream” Protestantism,** or rather the part thereof in which an important feature is pre-destination. You are not in control of how you will fare after death. Religion is not a huge part of your daily life. Your relationship with God and Jesus is more direct than in Catholicism because it is not mediated by the Roman Catholic hierarchy and all its institutions.

- **Born-again, Evangelical Protestantism:** A very intimate relationship with the divine. Accept Christ, love Him (and don’t forget to love His Father too), make him part of your every thought and action, and you will get what the Catholics (and others) are hoping for but won’t get. Eternity in paradise is only for the born-again.

There was a joke that was popular among many of the Jewish New Yorkers I knew at college: Moses and Jesus each come back to earth, appearing in New York, and begin to seek followers. As their campaigns progress, some of their followers start to fight each other; this gets worse, gets really violent, people are killed, it looks like the Middle East, and at some point Moses and Jesus are brought together under a flag of truce (think Mayor Bloomberg); they agree that the fighting should be stopped and further agree that to stop it, they will compete in a one-on-one duel and that the loser

\(^4\) Some readers of this thesis, in draft, have noted that this bullet point may be insulting. I mean no offense to Roman Catholics, including clerics, as individuals, and am ready to acknowledge that almost all of them may be fine people. But I insist on referring to the abuses of the Church, because they are a significant part of the story of why its memes have been losing ground ever since Martin Luther. This thesis concludes that the religious memes of the Church are quite attractive but (as is obvious) their sales force has included some people who did some awful things that the Church tolerated (over the entire 2000 years), and that this has repelled a multitude of lay people who might otherwise have been followers.
will retire. The duel will consist of walking on water. They proceed to Coney Island, followed by thousands of their partisans cheering them on. They walk out onto the beach, pause for a moment, and continue seaward. After a few paces, Jesus notices that he is getting into trouble; the water is up to his ankles, then to his shins…while Moses seems happily walking on the water’s surface. A few more paces and the water is lapping at Jesus’ knees. In a panic he calls to Moses: “Moses, I can’t do it anymore; how are you able to walk on water?” “Schmuck,” Moses replies, “walk on the rocks!”

For better or for worse, history didn’t work out that way. According to a recent Pew Survey, Christians are now one-third of the world’s population while Jews comprise less than one-half of one percent. Contrary to the joke, Jesus continues to walk on the water with at worst an occasional stumble, while Moses remains in an “Old” testament, i.e. 2,000 or more years old pre-Christain history, which only a handful of followers regard as the end of the Holy Bible. Even the Heroic/Existentialist memes are doing better than Jehovah’s, as more and more people say they are atheists or agnostics, and (especially in Europe) fewer and fewer of even self-declared Christians are seen in church.

In the US as of the 2008 Pew Survey,\(^5\) 75.8% of adult Americans declared themselves as followers of some kind of Christianity. Jews were 1.7%. There are 45 times as many Christians as Jews in this country (for the world the multiplier is about 70). Within the Christian segment, Catholics were 23.9 percent of the total population,

mainline Protestants 18.1%, and Evangelical Protestants 26.3. This last is understated because “historically black” churches were listed separately; they account for 6.9% of the total population and are for the most part Evangelical. To get an approximation for the Heroes, 16.1% of the population said “unaffiliated” and another 0.8% either didn’t know or refused to answer. Rounding off, the picture is like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heroic or just plain uninterested</th>
<th>15% (20% in 2012) or less</th>
<th>Growing fast⁶</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old Testament Jehovah</td>
<td>Less than 2%</td>
<td>Stable/declining¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of which:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>Declining⁸</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline Protestant</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>Declining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical (most but not all “born-again”)</td>
<td>More than 26%</td>
<td>Growing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: author’s summary from 2008 Pew Survey.

The bottom line here is that the prevalence of the Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Mainline Protestant memes are declining in the US, while those of the nonbelievers at one extreme and what might be called the enthusiastic believers at the other are increasing. The two extremes are gaining and “the center cannot hold…” Evangelicals

---

⁶ From the Pew Survey, 9 October 2012: The number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace. One-fifth of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling. In the last five years alone, the unaffiliated have increased from just over 15% to just under 20% of all U.S. adults. Their ranks now include more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics (nearly 6% of the U.S. public), as well as nearly 33 million people who say they have no particular religious affiliation (14%). [http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx](http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx) (accessed July 2013).

⁷ The story in Judaism is the decline of the Orthodox. In this survey, 41% of the Jews are Reform and 29% are Conservative. Most people who self-identify as Jews, both in and outside of Israel, are not engaged in anything like the old-time, Old Testament fearful worship of Jehovah.

⁸ Catholicism has experienced the greatest net losses as a result of affiliation changes. While nearly one-in-three Americans (31%) were raised in the Catholic faith, today fewer than one-in-four (24%) describe themselves as Catholic. These losses would have been even more pronounced were it not for the offsetting impact of immigration. [http://religions.pewforum.org/reports](http://religions.pewforum.org/reports) (accessed July 2013).
are also the fastest growing group in Latin America, while the just plain uninterested are becoming ubiquitous in western Europe.

Why?

**The Market Power of the Born-Again Meme**

The success of the born-again meme in the American market has two parts: “why America” and “why born-again?”

**Why in America?:** A major part of the answer to “why America?” is the extraordinary openness of the American market for religion.\(^9\) The USA has been, and still is, unique or nearly so in its openness to new religions, sects and variants thereof, and the resulting religious diversity of its population. The survey codebook for the 2007 Pew Forum on religion & public life has 27 pages (that’s right, 27 pages, with some duplication but… ) of different possible answers to “what is your religion?”\(^10\) The Wiki entry on religion in the USA lists 78 different self-reported “religious bodies” with membership over 60,000. This does not even count Wicca, Jedi Knights, followers of Werner Erhard, and God knows how many others.\(^11\) Table 2 at the end of this chapter shows this astonishing variety. Can any country match such diversity?

Table 1 at the end of this chapter shows some crude measures of religious diversity for the seventy-seven countries with populations over 10 million. The

---

\(^9\) The part of this section about “why America?” draws on a paper I wrote in 2011 for the Georgetown MALS course “Politics and Religion In America,” taught by Professor Lauve Steenhuisen.  
measures are the percent of the population that is in the single, or the two most popular religions; lower percentages signal more diversity. The USA ranks 17 out of 77 on the latter index, indicating well-above-median diversity. Moreover, it seems almost certain that these data understate diversity more in America than elsewhere, by lumping Catholicism and every Protestant sect into the one category “Christian,” within which diversity in the US must exceed that in most if not all other predominantly Christian societies.

Examining the 16 countries with more diversity than the USA, three or more of them (in green) have lots of people that are not religious at all. (China, Czech Republic, Germany, and maybe Australia and Ukraine). Almost all the others are African countries (in yellow), where the diversity reflects the combination of several different indigenous religions, and the incursion of Islam and then Christian missionaries. Malaysia is a country created out of parts of several islands in 1963, and its diversity reflects the pre-existing ethnic and religious differences among the different parts of the agglomeration.\(^\text{12}\)

The bottom line is that there is no country in Europe or Latin America, and few outside of sub-Saharan Africa, that have both the high religiosity and also the very high diversity of the USA. The numbers support Columbia University Professor Randall

\(^{12}\) Malaysia is a made-up country consisting of parts of several islands in southeast Asia that were put together in 1963. Its population reflects this and also its history; according to the CIA fact book it is Malay 50.4%, Chinese 23.7%, indigenous 11%, Indian 7.1%, others 7.8% . Religious diversity is similarly great: Muslim 60.4%, Buddhist 19.2%, Christian 9.1%, Hindu 6.3%, Confucianism, Taoism, other traditional Chinese religions 2.6%, other or unknown 1.5%, none 0.8% From https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/my.html (accessed 7 February 2011).
Balmer’s conclusion that “ever since the first days of European settlement—and even before that with the wide variety of Native cultures—diversity has been one of the distinguishing features of religious life in North America.” and Harvard Professor Diana Eck’s naming the USA as “the world’s most religiously diverse nation” (quoted in Gaustad, page 412).

The extremely high diversity of religions in the USA has three major sources: immigration from many different countries; the many post-immigration schisms in the religions that the migrants brought with them; and the creation of new religions right here in the USA. The immigration side of the story is important to diversity but not to us here. What interests us is the latter two factors: the ease of forming, indeed, the economic pressure to form, schisms and new religions in this country.\(^{13}\)

Going back to the biological analogy: American society has been rich with forces that generate religious mutations, a permissive environment that does not search them out and suppress them (nurtured in part by the entire history of the Reformation, starting with Luther, although unsuccessfully attacked by early English immigrants e..g. Cotton Mather), and nutrients that feed them. We may have been a melting pot but we have surely also been a prodigiously productive environment for the creation and nurturing of new religious memes.

\(^{13}\) The plethora of truly new religions and spiritual cults is relevant to this thesis only in that it strengthens the argument that the US has been exceptionally open to mutation in religious memes. To supplement the material mentioned in the text here, and the cited works from which much of that material comes, one current, extreme yet typical, example is presented in Appendix 2 to this chapter.
With the single exception of Australia, which is even more diverse religiously than the US (see Table 1), no nation on earth had the combination of factors favoring diversity that existed here in the US. In no particular order, we find:

- **A nation of immigrants**: Migrants self-select for independent people who tend more than others to reject authority.

- **No central religious authority**: The dominance of Protestants (or, perhaps better, the paucity of Catholics; Jews were similar to Protestants in this respect) was crucial. Not only England and Scotland, but Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands were sources of largely Protestant new Americans (Gaustad, Chapter 4 in its entirety). Among these churches (which were quite varied among themselves; again see Gaustad Chapter 4) there was no central authority to impose stability of doctrine, education or ordination of clergy, or religious practice in general. (Although most states had their separate established religions for quite some time, e.g. the Anglican Church in Virginia.) Some people and institutions tried, indeed tried mightily. From Cotton Mather and his rigorous Puritans\(^\text{14}\) down through the College of William and Mary, established in Virginia in 1693 in part to train Anglican clergy, the subsequent founding of Harvard in 1636, Yale in 1701 and Dartmouth in 1769 for the same purposes, etc. etc., attempts to promote any single sect met with competition from others, and on the American frontier there was no authority to stop it. “American” of course here means what is now most of the USA; the picture in Latin America was, clearly, dominated by the self-supporting, hand-in-glove Spanish and Portuguese crowns and the Catholic Church, and the consequent lack of diversity has endured (although it has been increasingly challenged in recent decades by Protestant Evangelicals!).

- **The frontier**, of course, famously facilitated diversity of religious practice. The weakness, or indeed the complete lack in many times and places, of central authority of any kind facilitated the decreasing importance of doctrine, theology and its disciplined scholarly interpretation, and hierarchy, in favor of emotion, personal interpretation, and the individual’s direct contact with the divine. This is the story of the rise of the Evangelicals, the first and second “great awakenings.” On the frontier, “…local preachers … responded to what they believed to be a divine call… No hierarchy was needed to approve such a ministry; no college or advanced education was required…” (Gaustad page 168). Frontier preachers “…shared a fondness for … religion more intense, kinetic, and personal…” (page 44). Evangelism appealed to slaves because it

\(^{14}\) Mather, for all his strict Puritan ideology, struck a blow for diversity by promoting “Congregationalism,” i.e. the independence of each local congregation and its minister from any higher ecclesiastical authority (see e.g. Gaustad page 53).
was “…more accessible, more liberating, more emotionally satisfying; … [it] could be sung, shouted, and even danced…” (page 45). It saw “spiritual wisdom and grace … [as] not a thing that belongs to reason … but depends on the sense of the heart” (quoting Jonathan Edwards on page 59). Part of the fertility that nurtured this undisciplined enthusiasm was the predominantly unschooled, illiterate nature of the population. Hofstadder paints a shocking picture of the lack of education, churches, and other aspects of civilization on the southern frontier at the time of the first great awakening: “The Southern revivalists carried the light of the gospel to a people who were not only unchurched but often uncivilized” (page 75). He quotes a traveling Anglican minister: “…these people despise knowledge…” (page 75). He quotes another, writing about a town in Indiana: “Religious sects are numerous & blind guides enough to swallow all the camels in Arabia… Some of them cant (sic) read… and all harmoniously unite in decrying education… (page 79). Even in the established Anglican churches of Virginia, “Ministerial quality throughout the seventeenth century proved a problem virtually beyond solution. For a time it seemed that only those clergy left England who wished to escape bad debts, unhappy marriages, or unsavory reputations” (Gaustad page 41).

- Entrepreneurial competition: Frontier conditions, and the lack of any central authority to provide economic support for Protestant preachers, added another spur to diversity. Preaching became a way to earn a living, inviting for a man whose tongue was more agile than his arms were strong, or his skills suited to the back-breaking labors of farming. With freedom of religion, and without funding from either the State or a central religious treasury (in most religions), a highly competitive market emerged. Competition for parishioners sparked the entrepreneurship of emergent and existing preachers, and a million flowers bloomed. This phenomenon has led (forced?) preachers to use what business schools call “product differentiation.” Most of the churches that neither innovate nor benefit from central funding have been in difficulties for some time. Preachers from the colonial era to the present day depart from received doctrine and/or ritual to differentiate themselves from their competitors. “To exist, churches had to persuade and recruit, win and enlist vast multitudes to their own fellowships and budgets” (Gaustad page 145). Hatch quotes “a New England clergyman,” resentful of his eager competitors, saying: “They measure the progress of religion by the numbers who flock to their [churches], not by the prevalence of faith and piety…” then quotes the inevitable Tocqueville: “Where I expect to find a priest, I find a politician” (Hatch, page 13). It is risky to try to improve on Tocqueville but I dare to speculate that what he saw were men trying to sell themselves without delivering any

---

15 There is much more on this in Hatch, focused on the colonial and republican periods, Marsden who focuses on 1870-1925, and Hofstadder whose focus is on the mid-20th century.

16 Pages 75-80 as a whole describe the primitive nature of the men and women who were the targets of these frontier preachers.
tangible good or service; what might have been more accurately described as an entrepreneur.\textsuperscript{17}

- With low “barriers to entry” (another economics concept, describing an activity that’s easy to get started in), this product differentiation has produced “a lid for every pot.” You name the details of the kind of religion you want, and in the USA you can find it. Women priests, gay congregations, synagogues where neither the congregation nor the rabbi believe in God as well as Mormons who tithe, Catholics who want to go back to the Latin mass, and Jehovah’s Witnesses who proselytize while awaiting an imminent millennium.

\textbf{Why born-again?}: The preceding discussion has already brought us into the second question of this section, “why born-again?” Our proposed answer, not rocket science, is that in the highly competitive market for parishioners, the born-again memes are the most attractive and the salesmen (preachers) for those memes were the most aggressive. A good product and good marketing make a hard combination to beat!

Let’s look at the marketing part first. We have already discussed the aggressive salesmen of Evangelical Protestantism on America’s growing frontier, an area that now amounts to almost the entire country. Looking at our five variants, it’s apparent that the only aggressive proselytizers among them have been exactly the two that have been growing: the heroic-atheistic-agnostic one at one extreme and the Evangelists at the other. Jews, with the tiny exception of a very few sects concentrated in a very few places, simply do not proselytize anywhere in the world, and even those few exceptions target mostly members of other Jewish sects, or non-observant Jews. This both reflects, and in turn strengthens, its nature as a tribal/ethnic/cultural entity along with its

\textsuperscript{17} No doubt there were, and still are, both politicians and preachers who are motivated by a desire to serve others. The observers and scholars quoted here, as well as common sense and everyday observation, show that drives for money and power are also important. Regardless of what the mix of these disparate motivations may be, the point here is that regardless of motivation, the United States has provided and still provides excellent conditions that facilitate preaching of just about any kind of “religion.”
theological dimensions. Roman Catholics and main-line Protestants, compared to
Evangelicals, similarly have done little missionary work in the USA, and most of that
has been in colonial times, and concentrated on native Americans, a very small and
shrinking population.

Moving from the marketing to the product, *i.e.* the attractiveness of the memes,
the pattern of proselytizing matches the pattern of attractiveness.

The monotheism meme ushered in by the Jews and the Old Testament has been
a winner. It supplanted the polytheistic, heroic memes in large portions of the
population in which it appeared. The Ten Commandments, or rather the last five of
them, codified and attributed to an almighty god a set of ethical principles that must
have existed long before Judaism.\(^{18}\) The association of these existing memes about how
to behave in society with other memes about god was, one can say, a marriage made in
heaven. Each set strengthened the other until today some religious zealots claim
(almost certainly contradicting both history and cross-cultural observation) that morality
would or could not exist if we didn’t have Jehovah up there to make us heed the rules.

Christianity developed an even fitter variation with a greatly increased stress on
the afterlife, with the carrot of eternal paradise and the stick of eternal hellfire, plus the
god-loves-you-and-you-should-love-him meme. These two modifications to the
Jehovah memes are very clearly excellent complements; that combination quickly out-

\(^{18}\) They are found all over the world; see *e.g.* Joyce, page 65, and Haidt, various places as
did the stark, rule-based, Jehovah meme that didn’t have much emphasis on either love or an afterlife.

From a marketing point of view the Old Testament Jehovah didn’t offer very much compared to its competitor, New Testament Christianity: lots of rules, and only vague ideas about heaven or a life after death. Jews, the principal bearers of these memes, are almost exclusively born into the religion, and to be Jewish is much more related to being members of a large family than to practicing a religion, as the large number of non-observant Jews all over the world attest. American Jews sometimes identify another person as a Jew by saying “he’s an MOT” meaning “member of the tribe.” If there is any religion that confirms Durkheim’s view that a key function of religion and its rituals is to establish and strengthen a sense of community, with all the positive survival benefits that community in turn confers (cooperation, trust, contacts for example) it is Judaism. One could say that the very strength of Judaism, its making you a member of a tribe, is also the reason it inherently cannot attract many converts. The few converts it does attract are for the most part individuals, mostly women, who marry Jews and adopt the religion of their new spouses in order to do so.

Success and near-monopoly of the Christian meme complex have not been kind, however, to the main institution in the west that first carried this meme, the Roman Catholic Church. Just as in economics, monopoly led to product deterioration, neglect

---

19 Two, or several, families might be more accurate than one large family. Ashkenazim and Sephardim often don’t mix well; the ultra-religious Haredim in Israel despise all the others, etc. There may be more than one family but the basic fact remains: Judaism consists to a great extent in belonging, as contrasted to believing or acting.
or even abuses of the consumers, as the institution cared more for itself and its high officers than for its customers, a problem that continues to the present day.\textsuperscript{20}

Notwithstanding whatever good the Church has fostered, its lapses have been costly to its market appeal. From the selling of indulgences and other corrupt practices decried by Martin Luther in the sixteenth century, down to present day parishioners horrified by the church’s protection of child molesting priests and child-abusing orphanages (Ireland), not to mention financial scandals with Italian and other banks, the Roman Catholic Church has repelled many potential customers who otherwise are and were attracted to its promises and protections, \textit{i.e.} the love of Jesus Christ and the promise of paradise.

The Protestant Reformation exploited this weakness, retaining the same basic memes of Christianity but jettisoning the corrupt institution in particular and its centralized nature in general. This adaptation appealed not only to potential parishioners but also to many actual and potential priests, as it gave them more independence. It has proved also to be a strong survivor. It succeeded in supplanting Catholicism in many parts of Europe, and was carried to what became the USA by the early immigrants. Long dominant in the United States, it has failed to maintain its dominance in the face of subsequent immigration of Catholics and, more important, competition from Evangelistic variants.

\textsuperscript{20} The classic modern expositor of why a lack of competition is bad for the monopolist is competition guru Michael Porter, long-time professor at the Harvard Business School. See \textit{e.g.} his book \textit{Competitive Strategy}. 

65
Many reasons have been alleged for the success of the Protestant Evangelical memes, in comparison to the earlier established mainline Protestant denominations in this country. Many cite the warmth and enthusiasm of the Evangelicals, contrasted to the drier, more formal, more intellectual, less personal style of mainline Protestantism. The element of predestination, strong originally with Luther and Calvin, has not survived well. This meme might have had some small positive role at first in strengthening Protestantism’s more direct relationship with the divine, but on balance may have been originally a spandrel, and over time a counter-productive one at that.

Part of the original meme held that good works marked those who had been predestined for salvation, and this part has survived better, for example as the “Protestant work ethic,” than the basic negation of anyone’s ability to control his fate after death.

In colonial times, when some carriers of these Protestant memes found themselves on a frontier, rapidly expanding over space and in population, a new competitor arose that jettisoned the predestination meme while at the same time intensifying the Reformation’s earlier shift toward less intermediation between the divine and humans. Many aspects of being in a frontier environment nurtured this rebellion, and it has prospered, although through some ups and downs. It adopted a meme about inerrancy of the Bible, a strange idea to the establishment Protestants next to whom it appeared, which seems to have been necessary to its initial spread but which later led to debacles such as the Scopes trial and subsequent retreat of the entire Evangelical meme complex. Its renaissance since the Second World War, in a period

---

21 Thanks to Arnold Bradford for this point.
where the explanatory and productive powers of science have grown very rapidly, shows just how strong a survivor it is.

In addition to the factors just mentioned, a synthesis of some of the analysis in Karen Armstrong’s *The Battle for God*, and the concept of fragmentation presented in Georgetown Professor Arnold Bradford’s course on that subject, helps to understand the relative strengths of these two competing memes in the context of the USA since, perhaps, the Civil War.

Bradford describes a fragmentation of an older, more comfortable, more stable world view by the traumas of the ideas of Darwin on the evolution of *homo sapiens* from ape-like ancestors, and of Freud on the nasty things allegedly going on in our unconscious minds. Could such humans really be god-like creatures? Einstein, Heisenberg, and quantum physics on equivalence of matter and energy, light as both wave and particle, and the (almost universally misunderstood) uncertainty principle exacerbated the erosion of the familiar and easy-to-understand Newtonian “clockwork” universe. The horrors of the First World War led to further doubts about a loving God. To this list might be added the earlier traumas of the American Civil War, the upheavals and abuses of late 19th century industrialization, financial panics and depression, and later the Great Depression of the 1930s, World War II and its atomic bomb destruction of whole cities, and maybe even the much-overblown threat of Communism which followed. The United States from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century had plenty of scary things going on, in ideas and in facts, creating lots of angst and the natural reaction: a search for security, meaning, and stability.
Armstrong labels this search as a “lust for certainty” and describes how this played out within American Protestantism. Mainline views of the Bible as subject to interpretation were attacked by believers in Biblical inerrancy who saw (or claimed to see) “science” as unsure and as a generator of uncertainty. Insecurity and rapid change, as usual, generated fundamentalist reaction. According to this view, the Bible had to be literally correct and so, if it clashed with some scientific theory or finding, the latter must be wrong.

Armstrong makes much of the interplay of what she calls logos and mythos: logic and knowledge on the one hand, and belief and myths on the other. She alleges that in the struggle just described, mainline Protestantism erred (strategically) by trying to combine the two, to make religion conform to science. This, as she (and many others) memorably said elsewhere, produced both bad religion and bad science. People don’t flock to religion for logic, they flock there for comfort. They want certainty, not theory; certainty not only on facts but also on morality. To bring logos into the church is to let the fox into the henhouse. Thus the fundamentalist and Evangelist revolts against this uncertainty-reinforcing intellectualism, in the face of a “lust for certainty” in the context of the traumas of the time, produced not the happy Armstrong view that both logos and mythos were necessary but needed to be seen as complementary, each in its own sphere, but rather the rejection of mainline Protestantism’s logos in favor of a simplistic “God is the answer” retreat to a mythos that promised eternal life in paradise to anyone who would just accept Jesus as his or her savior. (See Armstrong pages 136-
Hofstadter also has a lot of similar material, with a richer historical/social dimension, especially in his Chapter 5.

This view is supported strongly by the current research of Tanya Luhrmann, a Professor of Anthropology at Stanford who specializes in Evangelical Protestantism. In an op-ed in the *New York Times* of 14 April 2013, titled “When God is Your Therapist,” she wrote:

I saw that [in many evangelical churches] … prayer is understood as a back-and-forth conversation with God — a daydream in which you talk with a wise, good, fatherly friend. Indeed, when congregants talk about their relationship with God, they often sound as if they think of God as some benign, complacent therapist who will listen to their concerns and help them to handle them. “It’s just like talking to a therapist,” one woman told me, “especially in the beginning, when you’re revealing things that are deep in your heart and deep in your soul, the things that have been pushed down and denied.”

… You can see this therapeutic dimension most clearly when evangelicals respond to the body blows of life. The churches I studied resisted turning to God for an explanation of tragedy. They asked only that people turn to God for help in dealing with the pain. “God doesn’t want to be analyzed,” one woman explained to me. “He wants your love.” A young man — a kind man with two adorable children and a loving wife — died unexpectedly in one of the churches where I spent time. When the pastor spoke in church the following Sunday, he did not try to explain the death. Instead, he told the church to experience God as present. “This is a difficult philosophical issue for Christians,” he said. “We who believe in a loving, personal God who created the earth and can intervene at any time — we have this problem.” His answer? … What should you do? Get to know God. “Learn to hang out with him now.” I saw the same thing at another church, where a young couple lost a child in a late miscarriage. Some months later I spent several hours with them. Clearly numbed, they told me they did not understand why God had allowed the child to die. But they never gave a theological explanation for what happened. They blamed neither their own wickedness nor demons. Instead, they talked about how important it was to know that God had stood by their side.

This approach to the age-old problem of theodicy [the argument that God is good despite the existence of evil] is not really available to mainstream Protestants and Catholics, [much less to Jews who don’t see God as good or evil
but simply as The Boss who must be feared and obeyed] who do not imagine a
God so intimate, so loving, so much like a person. That may help to explain why
it is Evangelical Christianity that has grown so much in the last 40 years. It can
seem puzzling that Evangelical Christians sidestep the apparent contradiction of
why bad things happen to good people. But for them, God is a relationship, not
an explanation. This may seem theologically simple-minded — indeed, even
some evangelical Christians find it so. But there are lots of ways to explain
things in this sophisticated, scientifically aware society. What churches like
these offer is a way of dealing with unhappiness. Tragedy, and prayers that
apparently go unanswered, can actually strengthen believers’ sense of a bond
with God. That’s when they feel that they most need Him.

So born-again Evangelism offers a close personal loving relationship with the
divine. All questions are answered; doubt and uncertainty are vanquished. Rituals can
be and are adapted readily to the tastes of local parishioners. The impotence of not
being able to assure one’s entry to paradise is replaced by the very easy way to do it:
accept Jesus, love Him, make Him part of your daily life, and you will enjoy eternity in
paradise. That’s security! But wait! (as TV commercials for magical products say)
there’s more: All those other people who don’t follow your path, who maybe look
down on you because they are in one way or another higher class, will be barred from
eternal paradise. What a deal!

Born-again Evangelism also offered a tremendous opportunity to preachers.
Higher education, even ordination, were not required. There were no bosses. Any good
salesman-entrepreneur could make a living selling this attractive product, and many did
and still do. The mega-church moguls are thriving, and when, from time to time, some
dirty laundry about one of them appears in public the congregation may just forgive, or
shift to a competing purveyor of the same product. This basically unorganized religion,
which doesn’t have a Vatican or other central hierarchy, is better able to survive
scandal: the smell of any rotten apple is confined to its own barrel and the movement as a whole, *i.e.* the meme complex, is scarcely affected by the few exposed abusers of it.

Born-again Evangelism is so well designed to succeed that we may well wonder if it could really have arisen by evolutionary means. Surely only an Intelligent Designer could craft such a marvel?²²

The product/marketing schema about the “why” can be summarized in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variant</th>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Marketing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old Testament Jehovah</td>
<td>Moderately strong at first</td>
<td>Almost nonexistent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christianity in general</td>
<td>Much stronger</td>
<td>Much stronger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholicism</td>
<td>The same, but degraded by its church</td>
<td>Not strong in the USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline Protestantism</td>
<td>Removed the negatives of the Roman Catholic Church</td>
<td>Not strong in the USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born-again Evangelism</td>
<td>Stronger</td>
<td>Very strong in the USA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What about the parts that don’t make sense? We have just celebrated, or maybe explained, or maybe just told a story, about the fitness of the Evangelical, born-again meme complex. In this story we neglected some parts of this meme complex for which it is difficult to find a fitness-enhancing justification. Trained as an economist, I should be expert in explaining things after the fact. One of the puzzles that led me to this thesis, which struck me as impossible to explain when I began thinking seriously about

²²Mormonism was not included in this analysis. But at this point, it is striking how the analysis might predict the success (in terms of its increasingly large number of followers) of this variant. It combines born-again Evangelism’s guarantee of the certainty and exclusivity of paradise, and their active proselytizing, with the Jewish tribal/clan attraction. It thus seems to merit a place on the same far end of the spectrum as born-again Evangelical Protestantism, and its growing popularity is consistent with our conclusion that for those who want religion, a strong variant that promises certain salvation is most attractive. Thanks to Mal Huntley for this insight.
it around ten years ago, was the popularity of the belief in the inerrant, literal truth of the Bible that characterizes most born-again adherents. Belief in God, I reasoned, was not so unreasonable; at the very least God’s existence cannot be disproved. But how can a meme that gives higher credibility to a collection of old folk myths than to the findings of science prosper, to where it has now infected a large minority of the population of the United States?23

Belief in the inerrant, literal truth of the Bible seems to have been a supportive meme, perhaps crucially so, in the early competition of Evangelistic preachers against existing main-stream Protestantism. It removed the need for the preacher to be educated in order to be legitimate; he had the Bible in his hand and that’s all the knowledge he needed, as he shamelessly, indeed proudly, shouted to his customers. Recall the song “How do I know? The Bible tells me so.” Thus this meme did double duty; it served both to differentiate the preacher’s product, and also to legitimize a preacher who didn’t have any credentials such as education or ordination.

However, today the corollary of this belief, the rejection of science when its conclusions conflict with what the Bible seems to say (notably evolution), and more generally the refusal to distinguish between what one knows (e.g. the law of

---

23 A Pew Survey in 2009 fund that only 48% of Americans believe that “evolution is the best explanation for the origins of human life on earth,” http://www.pewforum.org/2009/02/04/religious-differences-on-the-question-of-evolution/. A Gallup poll in 2007 found that 31% of Americans believe that the Bible is literally true. Another 47% believed it is “inspired by the word of God.” http://www.gallup.com/poll/27682/one-third-americans-believe-Bible-literally-true.aspx. I recall a survey of other surveys that found the percentage of believers in Biblical inerrancy to vary between 40 and 50%, depending on the wording of the question, but cannot now find that source.
gravitation) and what one believes (e.g. dinosaurs co-existed with humans) may be making it counter-productive.

Belief in Biblical inerrancy not only brings disrespect from the rest of society. The defensive, anti-scientific view that comes from the stubborn refusal to acknowledge that the Bible, especially Genesis, is a collection of folk stories, myths, written by humans and certainly not literally true, may tend to carry over to other aspects of life to discourage critical thinking. The world view of a born-again Protestant does not conduce to asking a claimant to the truth “how do you know that?” and requiring an empirically-based and/or logical answer before accepting his claim. So infection by this meme may not only attract scorn from others, but might make its carrier less fit to perform other, non-religious functions in life, such as earning a living or not being fooled by confidence swindlers. Imagine “If you believe that the earth is less than 10,000 years old, I have a bridge to Brooklyn that I’d like to sell you.” This meme is clearly not fatal or seriously damaging to its carriers, but it seems at least a bit negative.

This potential Achilles’ heel of the born-again meme complex has to be evaluated, however, in the context of how natural selection operates in the case of memes. Memes for the rejection of science, if adopted by an entire society, might well cause that society to have serious problems, to not prosper, and therefore for the memes to have difficulty surviving, both as that society weakens and as other societies see it weakening and shun the memes. However in the USA these memes have never been adopted in any important way by a significant number of people who are important for the prospering of the society. We have been pursuing science at great force, basing it
on empiricism, on *logos*, in spite of the choice of almost half of us to rely on *mythos* where the two clash. The anti-*logos* bias does hurt the entire society in areas such as education, but only a little bit in scattered places. The Kansas School Board may downgrade the teaching of evolution in its high schools from time to time, but I dare say that there are few skeptics of Newton or of Einstein in NASA or the faculties of almost every university in the country. **At least one of the reasons that the anti-logos meme has been able to survive so well in certain parts of American society is that it has failed to dominate the entire society.** The harm it might do has been limited. More success might well lead to failure.

So we have a story about how the meme about inerrancy of the Bible might have started in the Evangelical movement, and some logic about why it hasn’t disappeared. What about the future? Looking at born-again congregations and their preaching today, I fail to see how the movement would suffer if it acknowledged that some parts of the Bible might be metaphors, allegories, or just simply stories added by people one or two thousand years ago. The core of Evangelical teaching really has nothing to do with the complete inerrancy of the entire Bible. So, will Evangelism shed this meme and thus increase its ability to survive as science continues to gain power? Will yet another movement arise that combines the attractive genes of Evangelism with an acknowledgement of the complementary-although-incongruent nature of *logos* and *mythos*? Quite possibly. In this scenario the survival power of the rest of the born-again meme complex would be enhanced by shedding one formerly useful but now somewhat counterproductive element.
There are other similar examples in our stories here. The Old Testament memes about kosher food may have been fitness-enhancing at one time; current-day apologists for them cite the dangers of trichinosis in pork. The requirement to bury corpses before two sunsets have passed may have had sanitary benefits when there was no refrigeration. But few Jews today follow these rules. Predestination may have been a useful element that differentiated Luther’s and Calvin’s product from the existing Catholic memes about how to earn a place in Paradise; as previously mentioned they were part of a logic that said that bribing church officials for forgiveness was not only wrong but also useless. But they rob the individual of the ability to affect his or her destiny, not something most humans find attractive, and today the predestination meme is not widespread, or even greatly emphasized among the sects that are the most direct descendants of its original preachers. The meme of saying the Catholic mass in Latin may have arisen because Latin was the only common language of the Catholic clergy (a spandrel par excellence), and grown in popularity as it became part of the mystery and ritual of the Church. Its fitness may have begun to decline with the invention of printing and the slow spread of literacy, and sped up with the faster spread of literacy and the general momentum of democratic practices in the twentieth century.

All these are only stories; they could be refuted if contradictory data appeared, and the lack of such data gives them some support, but they cannot be proven or tested rigorously. For me the general approach, i.e. mimetic Darwinian evolution of aspects of religion, makes sense and explains many phenomena that are otherwise inexplicable or
very difficult to understand. Until better explanations come along, they seem worthy of the modest verdict of “interesting; possibly correct.”

**What About the Godless View?**

The heroic-atheistic-agnostic-existential memes offer what *Dogville* promoted when The Boss convinced Grace to let him punish the citizens of the town for their meretricious behavior: the self-respect that comes from being accountable for one’s actions. Heroes don’t need the option of confessing, repenting, and being forgiven by the loving deity. They don’t need it because for them there is no afterlife; neither paradise nor hell-fire awaits them. As far as divine love and forgiveness go, they echo Rhett Butler’s farewell line to Scarlett O’Hara (as he walks off into the mist), “I don’t give a damn!” The receptivity of Americans (and Europeans) to these Heroic memes has no doubt been increased by the advances of science, the spread of education, the increase in sophistication as the population of the American heartland has morphed from illiterate isolated pioneers to university graduates who see the whole world on their television sets and maybe even while on a tour of Europe.

However, the Heroic view suffers in market appeal because it doesn’t do well in satisfying at least two important human needs.

One is for community: Eric Fromm emphasized the fear of being alone, of not belonging, of not having roots, as a crucial source of anxiety and potential malfunction of the individual. Durkheim emphasized the role of religion, any religion, as [in my words] an antidote for this fear; a provider of community. But the Hero may satisfy this need for belonging even without religion. He still has his family, tribe, clan, and/or
fellow citizens. In the Homeric canon, the Hero identifies himself by three things: his father and other ancestors, his place of birth and residence, and his deeds. He doesn’t mention which god or gods he prefers. “I am Laërtes’ son, Odysseus,” was the answer given to King Alkinoös by the shipwrecked stranger, “Men hold me formidable for guile in peace and war … my home is on the peaked sea-mark of Ithaka” (Odyssey 1963, 145-146). It was enough. We (almost) all have fathers and other forebears and we all come from some place. So the Hero can satisfy the need for belonging, to some extent at least, even without religion.

A second need that religion satisfies is for reassurance, of many kinds. Science may triumph over superstition where they contradict each other, but it seems incapable ever of satisfying what seems to be a genetically hard-wired need for meaning, the fear of death, and need for an explanation for every observation we humans can make, even those currently beyond science’s reach. Most serious may be the fear of death. Ernest Becker is perhaps extreme in his claims of the universality and tremendous force of this fear, but its existence and importance can’t be denied. Roman Catholicism and born-again Evangelism seem to be the strongest providers of comfort against fear of death; while Judaism and the Christian variants that carry predestination with them would seem to be weaker on this basic need. Heroism doesn’t really deal with it at all. This need for reassurance about what happens after death may well be the most powerful single reason for the near-universality of religious memes, and why they may well survive far into the future.
In a superb review essay in 2007, Robin Marantz Henig surveyed the then-current state of the debate about why belief in some kind of supernatural god or gods is so ubiquitous in humans. She repeated the idea that our evolution as hunter-gatherers favored three mental characteristics that are now universally observable in humans: a bias to seeing agency rather than accident when something happens, a bias to seeing cause and effect wherever there was association, and a “theory of mind” that enabled us to imagine what might be going on in the mind of another person. These three traits, now presumably hard-wired, are obviously conducive to believing in a conscious supernatural agent who is responsible for the many phenomena that we don’t understand. Henig continued the logic: the ubiquity of religious belief, plus this [and other] defensible explanations of it, suggest that our hard-wired default view may well be the theistic. She then closed her essay wondering if such hard wiring is adaptive or not in the modern world, and thus whether it would persist:

What can be made of atheists, then? If the evolutionary view of religion is true, they have to work hard at being atheists, to resist slipping into intrinsic habits of mind that make it easier to believe than not to believe. … The comforts and consolations of belief are alluring … [even to those with a scientific bent who] hold the values of rationalism higher than the values of spiritualism.

This internal push and pull between the spiritual and the rational reflects what used to be called the “God of the gaps” view of religion. The presumption was that as science was able to answer more questions about the natural world, God would be invoked to answer fewer, and religion would eventually recede. Research about the evolution of religion suggests otherwise. No matter how much science can explain, it seems, the real gap that God fills is an emptiness that our big-brained mental architecture interprets as a yearning for the

---


25 For a good, dispassionate, skeptical yet positive view of the possibility that humans are hard-wired for morality (NB not religion, but the arguments are similar) see Joyce 2007.
The drive to satisfy that yearning, according to both adaptationists and byproduct theorists, might be an inevitable and eternal part of … human cognition.

This argument is persuasive but needs at least one qualification. Why is the Godless view gaining adherents even without offering comfort or being pushed by a host of hungry salesmen? The answer must be that the “God of gaps” view mentioned by Henig is not as weak as she claims. What is happening is not so much the attractions of atheism (just how strong are they???) but rather the diminishing attractions of religion. Is religion important and does it satisfy widely felt needs? Yes. Are these needs becoming less widely felt, and are the institutions that provide them being more and more seen as imperfect? Also yes. So some people are moving away from religion, and those who stay with it are migrating to the variants that give them the most love, reassurance and support.

*Dogville* implicitly reflects the human need for the divine. The possibility of the Heroic does not arise in the movie; the only issue is what kind of god is better. The ending parable presents a case for a god who respects us and makes us responsible, rather than one who loves us so much that he forgives all our sins. In spite of its clever twist of having the old-time Jehovah convince the forgiving Christ of the superiority of responsibility over forgiveness, the parable doesn’t do well in the real world where more choices are available. The person who likes the concept of “freedom with responsibility,” who doesn’t need an all-forgiving religion that doesn’t respect its followers, has no need of the Old Testament Jehovah either. For most of us, to reject the all-forgiving Christ is not to accept the judgmental Jehovah. (For a contrary
instance see the appendix to this chapter.) Indeed Jehovah is a “dominated alternative” in operations research terminology. If people want a god then the loving, forgiving Christian God is (contrary to *Dogville*) more attractive, whereas if they prefer to stand on their own two feet they don’t need Jehovah and all his rules. So in the real world (of the West) people are going all the way, to one extreme or the other: either to a godless heroic stance, or to the born-again emotional, personal connection with the divine that promises salvation for those in the club and damnation for those who aren’t.

Evolution of these meme complexes will not stop. Born-again Protestantism may well evolve to something even stronger, may lose some of its less-fit memes, in particular the inerrancy of the Bible. At the same time, religion as a whole may continue to give way to skepticism. Some religions may well continue to lose followers. But I see no reason to expect the cores of either of these meme complexes, religion in general and the particular sect(s) of born-again Evangelism, to fade away any time soon.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>percent in religion</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>percent in religion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>top</td>
<td>top two</td>
<td>all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madagascar</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameroon</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burkina Faso</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanzania</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Republic</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cote d'Ivoire</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian Federation</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea, Dem. Rep.</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zambia</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congo, Dem. Rep.</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea, Rep.</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: religion data from Wikipedia “Religions by Country” which is based on over 100 different sources; population data from the World Bank “World Development Indicators.” All Christian denominations are considered the same in this report; this reduces reported diversity in the USA more than in most other countries.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Affiliation</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Protestant Churches</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Baptist Convention</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Baptist in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist Missionary Association</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Will Baptist</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Association of Regular Baptists</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Baptist denomination in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist in the Evangelical Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nondenominational in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nondenominational Evangelical</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nondenominational charismatic</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nondenominational fundamentalist</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nondenominational Christian</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdenominational in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Church in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other nondenominational group in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nondenominational in the Evang. Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran Church, Wisconsin Synod</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Lutheran denomination in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran in the Evangelical Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian Church in America</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Presbyterian denomination in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian in the Evangelical Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostal in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assemblies of God</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of God Cleveland Tennessee</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four Square Gospel</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostal Church of God</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostal Holiness Church</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nondenominational, Independent Pentecostal</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of God of the Apostolic Faith</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Pentecostal denomination in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostal in the Evangelical Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglican/Episcopal in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restorationist in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of Christ</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Churches and Churches of Christ</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restorationist in the Evangelical Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregationalist in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Congregational Christian</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Other Congregationalist denomination in the Evangelical Tradition <0.3
Congregationalist in the Evangelical Tradition, nfs <0.3

### Holiness in the Evangelical Tradition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Church of the Nazarene</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Methodist Church</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wesleyan Church</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian and Missionary Alliance</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of God (Anderson, Indiana)</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Holiness denomination in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holiness in the Evangelical Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Reformed in the Evangelical Tradition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christian Reformed Church</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Reformed denom. in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformed in the Evangelical Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Adventist in the Evangelical Tradition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seventh-Day Adventist</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Adventist group in the Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Anabaptist in the Evangelical Tradition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### Pietist in the Evangelical Tradition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### Other Evangelical/fundamentalist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### Protestant nonspecific in the Evangelical Tradition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### Mainline Protestant Churches

#### Baptist in the Mainline Tradition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Baptist Churches in USA</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Baptist denomination in the Mainline Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist in the Mainline Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Methodist in the Mainline Tradition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United Methodist Church</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Methodist denomination in the Mainline Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist in the Mainline Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Nondenominational in the Mainline Tradition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interdenominational in the Mainline Tradition</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other nondenominational group in the Mainline Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nondenominational in the Mainline Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Lutheran in the Mainline Tradition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Lutheran denomination in the Mainline Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran in the Mainline Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Presbyterian in the Mainline Tradition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian Church USA</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Presbyterian denomination in the Mainline Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian in the Mainline Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Anglican/Episcopal in the Mainline Tradition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Episcopal Church in the USA</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglican Church (Church of England)</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Anglican/Episcopal denomination in the Mainline Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglican/Episcopal in the Mainline Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Restorationist in the Mainline Tradition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disciples of Christ</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denomination</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restorationist in the Mainline Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregationalist in the Mainline Tradition</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Church of Christ</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregationalist in the Mainline Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformed in the Mainline Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformed Church in America</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Reformed denomination in the Mainline Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformed in the Mainline Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anabaptist in the Mainline Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends in the Mainline Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Protestant nfs in the Mainline Tradition</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historically Black Churches</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist in the Historically Black Tradition</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Baptist Convention</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive Baptist Convention</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Baptist in the Historically Black Tradition</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missionary Baptist</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Baptist denomination in the Historically Black Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist in the Historically Black Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist in the Historically Black Tradition</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Methodist Episcopal</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Methodist Episcopal Zion</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Methodist Episcopal Church</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Methodist in the Historically Black Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist in the Historically Black Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nondenominational in the Historically Black Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostal in the Historically Black Tradition</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of God in Christ</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apostolic Pentecostal in the Historically Black Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Pentecostal Church International</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Pentecostal in the Historically Black Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostal in the Historically Black Tradition, nfs</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holiness in the Historically Black Tradition</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant nonspecific in the Historically Black Tradition</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memo item: all Protestants</td>
<td>51.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All other religions</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community of Christ</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon, nfs</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Proportion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jehovah’s Witness</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek Orthodox</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian Orthodox</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Orthodox church</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox, nfs</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Christian</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphysical</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritualist</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity; Unity Church; Christ Church Unity</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Metaphysical</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Jewish groups</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish, nfs</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theravada (Vipassana) Buddhism</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahayana (Zen) Buddhism</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vajrayana (Tibetan) Buddhism</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Buddhist groups</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist, nfs</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim*</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunni</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shia</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Muslim groups</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim, nfs</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaishnava Hinduism</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaivite Hinduism</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Hindu groups</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu, nfs</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other World Religions</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Faiths</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unitarians and other liberal faiths</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unitarian (Universalist)</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal faith</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual but not religious</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eclectic, “a bit of everything,” own beliefs</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other liberal faith groups</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Age</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wica (Wiccan)</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pagan</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other New Age groups</td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Native American Religions</strong></td>
<td>&lt;0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No Religion</strong></td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing in particular</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“nfs” = not further specified

Source: Pew Forum on American Life
APPENDIX

DOGVILLE REINTERPRETED IN SEATTLE

The astounding diversity of Protestant religious sects in the United States is documented in many of the references listed in the Bibliography of this thesis, in Appendix 1 of this chapter, and is evident to anyone who looks for it while traveling in this country, or watching television on Sunday. This appendix describes in some detail one of the many such offshoots in the present day, one that caters to a niche of parishioners originally in Seattle WA, with a style and a message that are far indeed from any “mainstream” that could be defined.

The moral of Dogville is one of the basic premises of the Mars Hill Church. This church wants a God, and like Dogville (explicitly and very rudely in this case) it rejects the Christ who forgives all and grants eternal paradise to anyone who accepts Him, in favor of a more rigid set of rules for how to live. It caters to followers who prefer a more rigorous divinity. But it does this not by going back to the Old Testament Jehovah, as Dogville suggests, but rather in a Calvinist framework, explicitly preaching predestination. Follow the rules even though such good behavior won’t get you into heaven. But its preaching is like nothing that John Calvin could have imagined.

This particular example is presented here as a stark instance of the tremendous openness of American society to new variants of religion, the force of the entrepreneur as preacher who exploits (with whatever set of motives) this openness, and the resulting opportunity for any memes whatsoever to appear, combine with old ones to form new hybrids and, possibly, to flourish. There does indeed seem to be “a lid for every pot,”
and a wide variety of pots; where religion is concerned the American Frontier still exists. Folks who wrap snakes around themselves are not the only far-out Christians. The reporter who wrote the article five years ago ends with the questions of why, and for how long, this particular sect (then ten years old) would last. She need not have feared; as of a few months ago the original church in Seattle had expanded to 14 megachurches in 4 states, with weekly attendance of about 14,000 people.

“Who Would Jesus Smack Down?”¹

Mark Driscoll’s sermons are mostly too racy to post on GodTube, the evangelical Christian “family friendly” video-posting Web site. With titles like “Biblical Oral Sex” and “Pleasuring Your Spouse,” his clips do not stand a chance against the site’s content filters. No matter: YouTube is where Driscoll, the pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, would rather be… (H)e has the coolest style and foulest mouth of any preacher you’ve ever seen.

Mark Driscoll is American evangelicalism’s bête noire. In little more than a decade, his ministry has grown from a living-room Bible study to a megachurch that draws about 7,600 visitors to seven campuses around Seattle each Sunday, and his books, blogs and podcasts have made him one of the most admired — and reviled — figures among evangelicals nationwide. .. (W)hat is new about Driscoll is that he has resurrected a particular strain of fire and brimstone, one that most Americans assume died out with the Puritans: Calvinism, a theology that makes Pat Robertson seem warm and fuzzy.

… With his taste for vintage baseball caps and omnipresence on Facebook and iTunes, Driscoll, who is 38, is on the cutting edge of American pop culture. Yet his message seems radically unfashionable, even un-American: you are not captain of your soul or master of your fate but a depraved worm whose hard work and good deeds will get you nowhere, because God marked you for heaven or condemned you to hell before the beginning of time. Yet a significant number of young people in Seattle — and nationwide — say this is exactly what they want to hear. Calvinism has somehow become cool, and just as startling, this generally bookish creed has fused with a macho ethos. At Mars Hill, members

¹By Molly Worthen, New York Times, January 11, 2009
say their favorite movie isn’t “Amazing Grace” or “The Chronicles of Narnia” — it’s “Fight Club.”

Mars Hill Church is the furthest thing from a Puritan meetinghouse. Headquartered in a converted marine supply store, the church is a boxy gray building near the diesel-infused din of the Ballard Bridge. In the lobby one Sunday not long ago, college kids in jeans — some sporting nose rings or kitchen-sink dye jobs — lounged on ottomans and thumbed text messages to their friends. Buzz-cut and tattooed security guards mumbled into their headpieces and directed the crowd toward the auditorium, where the worship band was warming up for an hour of hymns with Bruce Springsteen’s “Born to Run.”

On that Sunday, Driscoll preached for an hour and 10 minutes — nearly three times longer than most pastors. As hip as he looks, his message brooks no compromise with Seattle’s permissive culture. New members can keep their taste in music, their retro T-shirts and their intimidating facial hair, but they had better abandon their feminism, premarital sex and any “modern” interpretations of the Bible. Driscoll is adamantly not the “weepy worship dude” he associates with liberal and mainstream evangelical churches, “singing prom songs to a Jesus who is presented as a wuss who took a beating and spent a lot of time putting product in his long hair.”

… Driscoll [says that God called him] to preach to men — particularly young men — to save them from an American Protestantism that has emasculated Christ and driven men from church pews with praise music that sounds more like boy-band ballads crooned to Jesus than “Onward Christian Soldiers.” What bothers Driscoll — and the growing number of evangelical pastors who agree with him — is not the trope of Jesus-as-lover... What really grates is the portrayal of Jesus as a wimp, or worse. Paintings depict a gentle man embracing children and cuddling lambs. Hymns celebrate his patience and tenderness. The mainstream church, Driscoll has written, has transformed Jesus into “a Richard Simmons, hippie, queer Christ,” a “neutered and limp-wristed popular Sky Fairy of pop culture that . . . would never talk about sin or send anyone to hell.”

… The “modern evangelical machine” is a product of the 1970s and ’80s, when a new generation of business-savvy pastors developed strategies to reach unbelievers turned off by traditional worship and evangelization. Their approach was “seeker sensitive”: upon learning that many people didn’t go in for stained glass and steeples, these pastors made their churches look like shopping malls. Complex theology intimidated the curious, and talk of damnation alienated potential converts — so they played down doctrine in favor of upbeat, practical teachings on the Christian life. These megachurches, like Joel Osteen’s
Lakewood Church in Houston and Bill Hybels’s Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois, have come to symbolize American evangelicalism. By any quantitative measure they are wildly successful… [and] Mars Hill has not entirely dispensed with megachurch marketing tactics. Its success in one of the most liberal and least-churched cities in America depends on being sensitive to the body-pierced and latte-drinking seekers of Seattle.

Ultimately, however, Driscoll’s theology means that his congregants’ salvation is not in his hands. It’s not in their own hands, either — this is the heart of Calvinism. Human beings are totally corrupted by original sin and predestined for heaven or hell, no matter their earthly conduct. We all deserve eternal damnation, but God, in his inscrutable mercy, has granted the grace of salvation to an elect few. While John Calvin’s 16th-century doctrines have deep roots in Christian tradition, they strike many modern evangelicals as nonsensical and even un-Christian. If predestination is true, they argue, then there is no point in missions to the unsaved or in leading a godly life. And some babies who die in infancy — if God placed them among the reprobate — go straight to hell with the rest of the damned, to “glorify his name by their own destruction,” as Calvin wrote. Since the early 19th century, most evangelicals have preferred a theology that stresses the believer’s free decision to accept God’s grace. To be born-again is a choice God wants you to make; if you so choose, Jesus will be your personal friend.

Yet Driscoll is not an isolated eccentric. Over the past two decades, preachers in places as far-flung as Minneapolis and Washington, D.C., in denominations ranging from Baptist to Pentecostal, are pushing “this new, aggressive, mission-minded Calvinism that really believes Calvinism is a transcript of the Gospel,” according to Roger Olson, a professor of theology at Baylor University. They have harnessed the Internet to recruit new believers, especially young people. Any curious seeker can find his way into a world of sermon podcasts and treatises by the Protestant Reformers and English Puritans, whose abstruse writings, though far from best-selling, are enjoying something of a renaissance. New converts stay in touch via blogs and Facebook groups with names like “John Calvin Is My Homeboy” and “Calvinism: The Group That Chooses You.”

… Traditional evangelical theology falls apart in the face of real tragedy, says the 20-year-old Brett Harris, who runs an evangelical teen blog with his twin brother, Alex. Reducing God to a projection of our own wishes trivializes divine sovereignty and fails to explain how both good and evil have a place in the divine plan. “There are plenty of comfortable people who can say, ‘God’s on my side,’” Harris says. “But they couldn’t turn around and say, ‘God gave me cancer.’” …Calvinists … reject the “positive thinking” ethos that Norman Vincent Peale made famous in the 1950s. That philosophy still dominates the
Christian self-help market in books like “Your Best Life Now” by Joel Osteen, which promises readers that everything from a Hawaiian vacation house to a beauty-pageant crown is within their grasp if only they “develop a can-do attitude.” Marianne Esterly, a women’s counselor at Mars Hill, says she tries to help women resist the desperation that can come with forgetting that man’s chief end is to glorify God, not to obsess over earthly problems. “They worship the trauma, or the anorexia, and that’s not what they’re designed to worship,” she says. “Christian self-help doesn’t work. We can’t do anything. It’s all the work of Christ.”

… Driscoll disdains the prohibitions of traditional evangelical Christianity. Taboos on alcohol, smoking, swearing and violent movies have done much to shape American Protestant culture — a culture that he has called the domain of “chicks and some chickified dudes with limp wrists.” Moreover, the Bible tells him that to seek salvation by self-righteous clean living is to behave like a Pharisee. Unlike fundamentalists who isolate themselves, creating “a separate culture where you live in a Christian cul-de-sac,” as one spiky-haired member named Andrew Pack puts it, Mars Hillians pride themselves on friendships with non-Christians. They tend to be cultural activists who play in rock bands and care about the arts, living out a long Reformed tradition that asserts Christ’s mandate over every corner of creation.

Like many New Calvinists, Driscoll advocates traditional gender roles, called “complementarianism” in theological parlance. Men and women are “equal spiritually, and it’s a difference of functionality, not intrinsic worth,” says Danielle Blazer, a 34-year-old Mars Hill member.

Mars Hill — with its conservative social teachings embedded in guitar solos and drum riffs, its megachurch presence in the heart of bohemian skepticism — thrives on paradox. Critics on the left and right alike predict that this delicate balance of opposites cannot last. Some are skeptical of a church so bent on staying perpetually “hip”: members have only recently begun to marry and have children, but surely those children will grow up, grow too cool for their cool church and rebel. Others say that Driscoll’s ego and taste for controversy will be Mars Hill’s Achilles’ heel. [Yet]… Driscoll’s New Calvinism underscores a curious fact: the doctrine of total human depravity has always had a funny way of emboldening, rather than humbling, its adherents.
REFERENCE LIST


“Christian fundamentalism,”


