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CHAPTER THREE

Faith and Reason

Freudians and political radicals, along with a great many people who would see themselves as neither, are aware that without reason we are sunk, but that reason, even so, is not in the end what is most fundamental about us. Richard Dawkins claims with grandiloquent folly that religious faith dispenses with reason altogether, which wasn't true even of the dim-witted authoritarian clerics who knocked me around at grammar school. Without reason, we perish; but reason does not go all the way down. It is not wall to wall. Even Richard Dawkins lives more by faith than by reason. There are even those uncharitable observers who have detected the mildest whiff of

obsessive irrationalism in his zealous campaign for secular rationality. His antireligious zeal makes the Grand Inquisitor look like a soggy liberal.

Indeed, Dawkins seems to nurture a positively Mao-like faith in faith itself—in the hopelessly idealist conception, for example, that religious ideology (as opposed, say, to material conditions or political injustice) is what fundamentally drives radical Islam. By contrast, Robert Pape's well-researched study of the subject, based on every suicide bombing since 1980, casts considerable doubt on this assumption.¹ In this inflation of the role of religion, Dawkins is close to many radical Islamists themselves. His belief in the power of religion is every bit as robust as the pope's.

To claim that reason does not go all the way down, yet not thereby to cave in to irrationalism, is as hard for the political radical as it is for the Freudian or theologian. Yet it is only if reason can draw upon energies and resources deeper, more tenacious, and less fragile than itself that it is capable of prevailing, a truth which liberal rationalism for the most part disastrously overlooks. And this brings us to the question of faith and reason, which is far from simply a theological question. There is probably no greater evidence of Ditchkins's theological illiteracy than the fact that he appears to subscribe to what one might call the Yeti view of belief in God. I mean by this the view that God is the sort of entity for which, like the Yeti, the Loch Ness monster, or the lost city of Atlantis, the evidence we have so far is radically ambiguous, not to say

downright dubious; and because we cannot thus demonstrate God's existence in the reasonably straightforward way we can demonstrate the existence of necrophilia or Michael Jackson, we have to put up instead with something less than certainty, known as faith.

One scarcely needs to point out even to first-year theology students what a travesty of Christian faith this is. On the most elementary questions of the theology on which he chooses to pronounce with such portentously self-regarding authority, Ditchkins is hopelessly at sea. For one thing, God differs from UFOs or the Yeti in not being even a possible object of cognition. In this sense he is more like the tooth fairy than Big Foot. For another thing, religious faith is not in the first place a matter of subscribing to the proposition that a Supreme Being exists, which is where almost all atheism and agnosticism goes awry. God does not "exist" as an entity in the world. Atheist and believer can at least concur on that. Moreover, faith is for the most part performative rather than propositional. Christians certainly believe that there is a God. But this is not what the credal statement "I believe in God" means. It resembles an utterance like "I have faith in you" more than it does a statement like "I have a steadfast conviction that some goblins are gay." Abraham had faith in God, but it is doubtful that it could even have occurred to him that he did not exist. The devils are traditionally said to believe that God exists, but they do not believe in him.

The Yeti theorists make another mistake as well. For

Christianity, faith is traditionally regarded as a question of certainty, not of plausibility, intelligent guesswork, or speculation. This is not to say that it is not also regarded as inferior to knowledge. But only fully paid-up rationalists think that nothing is certain but indisputable knowledge, if indeed such an entity exists. Faith, as the author of the *Epistle to the Hebrews* observes, is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen. The virtue of hope for Christianity equally involves a kind of certainty: it is a matter of an assured trust, not of keeping one's fingers crossed. Whatever else may divide science and religion, it is not for the theologian the issue of certainty. The certainty appropriate to faith is not, to be sure, of the same kind as that of a well-entrenched scientific observation like, "It's just turned red," or "The mouse is clearly drunk and the experiment is accordingly being abandoned," but neither for that matter are statements like, "I love you," or "Liberal democracy is a lot better than slavery," or "The overweening Emma Woodhouse finally gets her well-deserved comeuppance."

The relations between knowledge and belief are notably complex. A belief, for example, can be rational but not true. It was rational, given their assumptions and stock of knowledge, for our ancestors to hold certain doctrines which later turned out to be false. They thought that the sun circled the earth because it looks as though it does. (Though as Wittgenstein mischievously inquired, what would it look like if the earth turned on its axis?) Claims about the world can also be true

but not in a sense rational. No doubt much of what the nuclear physicists tell us is true, but it would hardly have seemed rational to Samuel Johnson or Bertrand Russell, and stretches our own sense of the nature of things to breaking point. “Reasonable” is not quite the word that leaps spontaneously to mind when we are told that the same nuclear particle can pass through two different apertures at the same time.

It is important to recognize that just as one can have faith but not knowledge, so the opposite is also true. If God, enraged at the flourishing of atheism almost everywhere but in his own specially favored United States, were tomorrow to emblazon the words “I’M UP HERE, YOU IDIOTS!” in mile-high letters in the sky, it would not necessarily make any difference to the question of faith. Instead, it might be a bit like the aliens in the Arthur C. Clarke novel who turn up for all to behold, but who make scarcely any difference to anything and are in the end more or less ignored. For such a dramatic self-disclosure to be relevant to faith, rather than just adding an extra item to our stock of knowledge, it would have to show up in a radical transformation of what we say and do. And whether seeing such a sign would really produce such a transformation is a point that the Jesus of the New Testament angrily takes leave to doubt. Those who demand a theorem or proposition rather than an executed body are not on the whole likely to have faith in any very interesting sense of the term.

One might well imagine that if God had suddenly

appeared to the novelist Thomas Hardy over the cow shed, Hardy would not have been unduly impressed. For Hardy saw God as the fictional point at which all purely human perspectives converged; and even if some Being could occupy this location in principle, he did not see as a good evolutionary thinker how he could be relevant to a human existence which is inherently partial and perspectival. This, incidentally, is a far more original use of evolution to discredit the idea of God than any Dawkins comes up with. For Hardy, God would have nothing very interesting to say even if he existed. In one of his poems, God did indeed create the world, but has long since ceased to take an interest in it. To adapt a phrase of Wittgenstein's: If God could speak, we would not care about what he said.

Slavoj Žižek remarks in his *In Defence of Lost Causes* that fundamentalism confuses faith with knowledge. The fundamentalist is like the kind of neurotic who can't trust that he is loved, but in infantile spirit demands some irrefragable proof of the fact. He is not really a *believer* at all. Fundamentalists are faithless. They are, in fact, the mirror image of skeptics. In a world of extreme uncertainty, only copper-bottomed, incontrovertible truths promulgated by God himself can be trusted. "For [religious fundamentalists]," Žižek writes, "religious statements and scientific statements belong to the same modality of positive knowledge . . . the occurrence of the term 'science' in the very name of some of the fundamentalist sects

(Christian Science, Scientology) is not just an obscene joke, but signals this reduction of belief to positive knowledge.”²

This is just what Ditchkins thinks as well. For him, too, religious statements are the same kind of thing as scientific ones; it is just that they are worthless and empty. Herbert McCabe, who holds the orthodox view that Christian faith is reasonable but not provable, points out that demanding watertight proofs can actually be a reactionary move. “It is a romantic myth,” he writes, “that there is some kind of moral superiority about people who refuse to make up their minds because the evidence is not 100 per cent compelling. We have seen too many people who have insisted that we can’t be absolutely *sure* that the Jews were persecuted in Germany, that apartheid was hideously unjust, that Catholics are persecuted in some places, that prisoners are tortured in others, and so on.”³ Besides, the scientific rationalist passes too quickly over the thorny issue of what is to *count* as certainty, as well as of the diverse species of certainty by which we live.

Nobody has ever clapped eyes on the unconscious. Yet many people believe in its existence, on the grounds that it makes excellent sense of their experience in the world. (One doubts that this includes Ditchkins, since the English tend to have common sense rather than an unconscious.) Moreover, a great deal of what we believe we do not know firsthand; instead, we have faith in the knowledge of specialists. It is also true that plenty of people believe in things that do not exist,

such as a wholly just society. The whole question of faith and knowledge, in short, is a good deal more complex than the rationalist suspects.

None of this is to suggest, as Dawkins seems to suspect, that religious claims require no evidence to back them up, or that they merely express “poetic” or subjective truths. If Jesus’s body is mingled with the dust of Palestine, Christian faith is in vain. We might clarify the relations between faith and knowledge here with an analogy. If I am in love with you, I must be prepared to explain what it is about you I find so lovable, otherwise the word “love” here has no more meaning than a grunt. I must supply reasons for my affection. But I am also bound to acknowledge that someone else might wholeheartedly endorse my reasons yet not be in love with you at all. The evidence by itself will not decide the issue. At some point along the line, a particular way of seeing the evidence emerges, one which involves a peculiar kind of personal engagement with it; and none of this is reducible to the facts themselves, in the sense of being ineluctably motivated by a bare account of them. Seeing something as a duck rather than as a rabbit, or as the crime of clitoridectomy rather than as a charming ethnic custom, is not a viewpoint that can be read off from the appearances. (We might note, by the way, the difference between this and the dubious notion that reason can take us so far, after which an existential leap into the dark proves essential.) You can know all there is to know as a Germanist about

the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, but this is no guarantee that they will not leave you cold.

None of this should strike a scientist like Dawkins as unfamiliar. I take it that scientists are in an important sense both believers and aestheticians. All communication involves faith; indeed, some linguisticians hold that the potential obstacles to acts of verbal understanding are so many and diverse that it is a minor miracle that they take place at all. And since reason is essentially dialogical, it, too, is a matter of communication, and thus involves a kind of faith. There is no point in simply brandishing the evidence unless you have a degree of trust in those who have gathered it, have some criteria of what counts as reliable evidence, and have argued the toss over it with those in the know.

The left-wing atheist Alain Badiou, who as perhaps the greatest living French philosopher is predictably almost unknown to British academia, understands this far better than his Anglo-Saxon liberal-rationalist counterparts. Badiou grasps the point that the kind of truth involved in acts of faith is neither independent of propositional truth nor reducible to it.⁴ Faith for him consists in a tenacious loyalty to what he calls an “event”—an utterly original happening which is out of joint with the smooth flow of history, and which is unnameable and ungraspable within the context in which it occurs. Truth is what cuts against the grain of the world, breaking with an older dispensation and founding a radically new reality. Such

momentous “truth events” come in various shapes and sizes, all the way from the resurrection of Jesus (in which Badiou does not believe for a moment) to the French Revolution, the moment of Cubism, Cantor’s set theory, Schoenberg’s atonal composition, the Chinese cultural revolution, and the militant politics of 1968.

For Badiou, one becomes an authentic human subject, as opposed to a mere anonymous member of the biological species, through one’s passionate allegiance to such a revelation. There is no truth event without the decisive act of a subject (only a subject can affirm that a truth event has actually taken place), which is not to say that such events are merely subjective. But there is also no subject other than one brought to birth by its fidelity to this disclosure. Truths and subjects are born at a stroke. What provokes a subject into existence for Badiou is an exceptional, utterly particular truth, which calls forth an act of commitment in which the subject is born. One thinks of the English word “troth,” meaning both faith and truth. But truth is also a question of solidarity, involving as it usually does the birth of a believing community such as the church. This commitment opens up a new order of truth, and being faithful to this truth is what Badiou means by the ethical. Like divine grace, a truth event represents an invitation which is available to everyone. Before the truth, we are all equal.

Such truth events for Badiou are real enough—indeed, more real than the shabby set of illusions which commonly

pass for reality. Yet they are not real in the sense that they do not “belong” to the situations from which they emerge, and cannot be counted up alongside other elements of that context. The resurrection for Christians is not just a metaphor. It is real enough, but not in the sense that you could have taken a photograph of it had you been lurking around Jesus’s tomb armed with a Kodak. Meanings and values are also real, but you cannot photograph them either. They are real in the same sense that a poem is real. Like singularities in space, or mathematical sets which belong purely to themselves, Badiou-type events are a kind of impossibility when measured by our usual yardsticks of normality. Yet for all that his ideas are likely to strike the Ditchkinses of this world as Parisian gobbledygook, Badiou regards himself as an Enlightenment thinker, mustering the resources of science, equality, and universality to combat what he calls “the infamy of superstition.”

I have had occasion to be critical of Badiou’s ideas elsewhere.⁵ There are an alarming number of problems with this theory. Badiou does, however, grasp the vital point that faith articulates a loving commitment before it counts as a description of the way things are. That it also involves an account of the way things are is clear enough, just as moral imperatives do. There is no point in issuing edicts against stealing if private property has been abolished. Anti-immigration laws are not needed at the North Pole. It is just that faith cannot be reduced to the endorsement of certain propositions which cannot be proved. What moves people to have faith in, say,

the possibility of a nonracist society is a set of commitments, not in the first place a set of propositions. They must already have some allegiance to an idea of justice, and to the possibility of its realization, if they are to be stirred to action by the knowledge that men and women are being refused employment because of their skin color. The knowledge in itself is not enough to do it.

“A believer, after all, is someone in love,” observes Kierkegaard in *The Sickness unto Death*, a claim that by no means applies only to religious believers. For Saint Anselm, reason is itself rooted in God, so that one can attain it fully only through faith. This is part of what he means by his celebrated assertion “I believe in order to understand”—a proposition which in a different sense could also apply to believers like socialists and feminists. Because you already take a passionate interest in women’s liberation, you can come to understand the workings of patriarchy better. Otherwise you might not bother. All reasoning is conducted within the ambit of some sort of faith, attraction, inclination, orientation, predisposition, or prior commitment. As Pascal writes, the saints maintain that we must love things before we can know them, presumably because only through our attraction to them can we come to know them fully.⁶ For Augustine and Aquinas, love is the precondition of truth: we seek truth because our material bodies manifest a built-in, ineradicable desire for it, a desire which is an expression of our longing for God. Aquinas’s well-known demonstrations of the existence of God

from reasoning about the universe already assume belief in him. Their intention is not to demonstrate God's existence as one might demonstrate the presence of a previously undetected planet, but to show believers how their faith can make sense in terms of the natural world.

Faith for Christian orthodoxy, then, is what makes true knowledge possible, which is true to some extent of everyday life as well. There is a remote parallel between this and Vladimir Lenin's claim that revolutionary theory can come to completion only on the basis of a mass revolutionary movement. Knowledge is gleaned through active engagement, and active engagement implies faith. Belief motivates action, to be sure; but there is also a sense in which you define your beliefs through what you do. Moreover, because we have come to see knowledge primarily on the model of knowing things rather than persons, we fail to notice another way in which faith and knowledge are interwoven. It is only by having faith in someone that we can take the risk of disclosing ourselves to him or her fully, thus making true knowledge of ourselves possible. Intelligibility is here closely bound up with availability, which is a moral notion. This is one of several senses in which knowledge and virtue go together. As the Duke rebukes the slanderous Lucio in *Measure for Measure*: "Love talks with better knowledge, and knowledge with dearer love" (act 3, scene 2).

In the end, only love (of which faith is a particular form) can achieve the well-nigh impossible goal of seeing a situation as it really is, shorn of both the brittle enchantments of

romance and the disheveled fantasies of desire. Clinical, cold-eyed realism of this kind demands all manner of virtues—openness to being wrong, selflessness, humility, generosity of spirit, hard labor, tenacity, a readiness to collaborate, conscientious judgment, and the like; and for Aquinas, all virtues have their source in love. Love is the ultimate form of soberly disenchanted realism, which is why it is the twin of truth. The two also have in common the fact that they are both usually unpleasant. Radicals tend to suspect that the truth is generally a lot less palatable than those in power would have us believe, and we have seen already just where love is likely to land you for the New Testament. In one sense of the word, dispassionateness would spell the death of knowledge, though not in another sense. Without some kind of desire or attraction we would not be roused to the labor of knowledge in the first place; but to know truly, we must also seek to surmount the snares and ruses of desire as best we can. We must try not to disfigure what we strive to know through fantasy, or reduce the object of knowledge to a narcissistic image of ourselves.

There are those nowadays who would regard faith in socialism as even more eccentric than the exotic conviction that the Blessed Virgin Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven. Why, then, do some of us still cling to this political faith, in the teeth of what many would regard as reason and solid evidence? Not only, I think, because socialism is such an extraordinarily good idea that it has proved exceedingly hard to discredit, and this despite its own most strenuous efforts. It

is also because one cannot accept that this—the world we see groaning in agony around us—is the only way things could be, though empirically speaking this might certainly prove to be the case; because one gazes with wondering bemusement on those hard-headed types for whom all this, given a reformist tweak or two, is as good as it gets; because to back down from this vision would be to betray what one feels are the most precious powers and capacities of human beings; because however hard one tries, one simply cannot shake off the primitive conviction that *this is not how it is supposed to be*, however much we are conscious that this seeing the world in the light of Judgment Day, as Walter Benjamin might put it, is folly to the financiers and a stumbling block to stockbrokers; because there is something in this vision which calls to the depths of one's being and evokes a passionate assent there; because not to feel this would not to be oneself; because one is too much in love with this vision of humankind to back down, walk away, or take no for an answer.

None of this runs counter to reason—as it would, say, if the world was already a nuclear waste land, or if socialism had actually been established already and we had simply not noticed. It is just that it is a different kind of thing from a scientific observation or an everyday piece of cognition—as, indeed, Ditchkins's belief in the value of individual freedom differs from such things. Ditchkins cannot ground such beliefs scientifically, and there is absolutely no reason why he should. Which is not to suggest, of course, that he is dispensed

from adducing evidence for them. We hold plenty of beliefs that have no unimpeachable justification, but which are nevertheless reasonable to entertain. In fact, anti-foundationalists would claim that none of our beliefs or knowledge claims can be unimpeachably justified. If proof means whatever compels assent, it is in drastically short supply. Thomas Aquinas certainly did not believe that the existence of God was self-evident.

Yet this, needless to say, is not to suggest that the whole of our knowledge and belief is a fiction. A hunger for absolute justification is a neurosis, not a tenacity to be admired. It is like checking every five minutes that there is no nest of hissing cobras under your bed, or like the man in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* who buys a second copy of the daily newspaper to assure himself that what the first copy said was true. Justifications must come to an end somewhere; and where they generally come to an end is in some kind of faith.

Christopher Hitchens would appear to disagree about this question of grounding. "Our belief is not a belief," he writes of atheists like himself in *God Is Not Great*. "Our principles are not a faith."⁷ So liberal humanism of the Ditchkins variety is not a belief. It involves, for example, no trust in men and women's rationality or desire for freedom, no conviction of the evils of tyranny and oppression, no passionate faith that men and women are at their best when not laboring under myth and superstition. Hitchens is clear that secular liberals like himself (we lay charitably aside here his neoconservative

fellow-traveling) do not rely “solely upon science and reason,” so he is not contrasting belief with scientifically based propositions. What he is really doing is contrasting his own beliefs with other people’s. “We [secular liberals] distrust anything that contradicts science or outrages reason,” he observes (5). Most Christians do not in fact hold that their faith contradicts science—though it would be plausible to claim that in some sense science contradicts itself all the time, and that this is known as scientific progress. Hitchens fails to distinguish between reasonable beliefs and unreasonable ones. His belief that one should distrust anything that outrages reason is one example of a reasonable belief, while his belief that all belief is blind is an example of an unreasonable one.

Ditchkins does not exactly fall over himself to point out how many major scientific hypotheses confidently cobbled together by our ancestors have crumbled to dust, and how probable it is that the same fate will befall many of the most cherished scientific doctrines of the present. As for outrages to reason, there are those who would consider Hitchens’s raucous support for the U.S. invasion of Iraq to be precisely that. (Dawkins, to his credit, strongly opposed the war.) Strangely, when it comes to that invasion, this garrulous columnist, well accustomed to broadcasting his opinions on everything from Mother Teresa to the café life of Tehran, is suddenly afflicted by a bout of coyness. “I am not going to elaborate a position on the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in April 2003” (25), he tells us. Why on earth not? He does, for all that, discuss the

war a little, diplomatically passing over such matters as U.S. atrocities or the West's unslakable thirst for oil.

Hitchens did not, he informs us, hold his former Marxist opinions "as a matter of faith" (151), leaving us wondering whether he believed at the time that injustice could be scientifically established. Even the most positivistic of Marxists might blench at the thought. (Though he is no longer a Marxist, he feels, so he tells us, "no less radical" than he did then [153], a view of himself shared by rather fewer people than suspect Kate Winslet of being the Anti-Christ.) Later on he refers disparagingly to "people of faith" (230), apparently unaware that as a champion of both free speech and imperial aggression, neither of which can be demonstrated in the laboratory to be unequivocal goods, he must logically fall under this description himself. He lands himself in this mildly comic intellectual mess because he seems to assume that all faith is blind faith. One wonders whether this applies to having faith in one's friends or children. A lot of people do indeed have a blind faith in their own children. But this is a mistake. One cannot rule out in advance the possibility that one's fourteen-year-old son is a serial killer. One should be in principle open to this possibility, assess the evidence if called upon to do so, and, if the case seems to be watertight, cease to have faith in him. The sheer fact that he is your son makes no difference to this. All serial killers are somebody's sons.

Humanists differ from religious believers, *God Is Not Great* informs us, because they have no "unalterable system of

belief” (250). One takes it, then, that Hitchens stands ready at any moment to jettison his belief in human liberty, along with his distaste for political tyrants and Islamic suicide bombers. In fact, of course, he turns out to be a skeptic when it comes to other people’s dogmas and a true believer when it comes to his own. There is, by the way, nothing wrong with dogma, which simply means “things taught.” The liberal principles of freedom and tolerance are dogmas, and are none the worse for that. It is simply a liberal paradox that there must be something closed-minded about open-mindedness and something inflexible about tolerance. Liberalism cannot afford to be over-liberal when it comes to its own founding principles, which is one reason why the West is caught between treating its illiberal enemies justly and crushing their testicles. As British prime minister Tony Blair remarked in a classic piece of self-deconstruction: “Our tolerance is part of what makes Britain Britain. So conform to it, or don’t come here.” Hitchens dislikes people who “*know* they are right” (282), but most of the time he sounds very much like one of them himself. It is sheer bad faith for him to claim that he is provisional about his own liberal-humanist values. He is nothing of the kind, and there is no earthly reason why he should be. Besides, if he dislikes know-alls, how come he hangs around with some of that fundamentalist crew known as neocons?

I have been examining among other things some of the ways in which the faculty of reason does not go all the way down.

We need, for example, a commitment to reason itself, which is not itself reducible to reason. We can always ask ourselves, why discovering the truth should be considered so desirable in the first place. Certainly Nietzsche did not think so, while Henrik Ibsen and Joseph Conrad both had their doubts about it. What rancor, malice, anxiety, or urge to dominion, Nietzsche might inquire, lurks behind this obdurate will to truth? “There is no more factual basis for the claim that we have a moral duty to discover and share the truth,” writes Dan Hind, “than there is for the claim that Jesus was the son of God.”⁸ If we are to defend reason, we must be inspired by more than reason to do so. It was not self-evident to Sorel or Schopenhauer that reason was to be prized.

There are legitimate disputes over the nature and status of rationality itself, which are far from involving a surrender to irrationalism—to what extent, for example, reason encompasses the aesthetic, imaginative, intuitive, sensuous, and affective; in what sense it might be a dialogical affair; what counts as a rational foundation; whether reason inherently implicates the values of freedom, autonomy, and self-determination; and whether it is substantive or procedural, axiomatic or contestable, instrumental or autotelic. We may ask to what extent it represents in its totalizing, all-explanatory nature a recycled version of the mythologies it sought historically to oust; whether it is to be modeled primarily on our knowledge of objects or on our knowledge of persons; and what relations the rational ego maintains with

the superego and the primary processes. We may further inquire what we are to make of the fact that even before we have started to reason properly, the world is in principle intelligible in the first place; whether it is true that we reason as we do because of what we do, and whether reason is to be associated with common sense and moderation, as it is by liberal rationalists like Ditchkins, or with revolution, as it was by John Milton and the Jacobins. There are questions about whether reason only takes flight at dusk; whether it is to be contrasted with our animality or seen as an integral part of it, and so on.

For Aquinas, to quote Denys Turner, “rationality is the form of our animality . . . bodiliness is the stuff of our intellectual being.”⁹ Theology is in this sense a species of materialism. We reason as we do because of the kind of material creatures we are. We are reasonable *because* we are animals, not despite being so. If an angel could speak, we would not be able to understand what he said. It is hard to feel that such considerations lie to the forefront of the mind of Richard Dawkins, whose rationalist complacency is of just the sort Jonathan Swift so magnificently savaged. It is equally hard to feel that they have been much brooded upon by Christopher Hitchens, who as a superb journalist but an indifferent theorist is more at home with the politics of Zimbabwe than with abstract ideas.

In Robert Bolt’s play *A Man for All Seasons*, Thomas More advances a very Catholic defense of reason, declaring that man has been created by God to serve him “in the wit and

tangle of his mind.” When a new version of the oath of allegiance to the king is produced, More eagerly asks his daughter what the exact wording is. What does it matter? she replies impatiently, taking a stand on the “spirit” or principle of the document. To which More himself replies in typically papist, semantic-materialist style: “An oath is made of words. I may be able to take it.” Yet it is the same More who, when berated by his daughter for not seeing reason and submitting to the king, observes: “Well, in the end it’s not a matter of reason. In the end it’s a matter of love.” Reasons run out in the end. But the end is a long time coming.

For the philosopher Fichte, faith (though not the religious variety) is prior to and foundational of all knowledge. For Heidegger and Wittgenstein, knowledge works within the assumptions embedded in our practical bound-upness with the world, which can never be precisely formalized or thematized. “It is our acting,” Wittgenstein remarks in *On Certainty*, “that lies at the bottom of our language games.”¹⁰ Know-how precedes knowing. All our theorizing is based, however remotely, on our practical forms of life. Some post-modern thinkers conclude from this that reason is too much on the inside of a way of life to offer an effective critique of it. On their view, the terms of such a critique can only be derived from one’s present way of life; yet it is precisely this way of life which the critique seeks to scrutinize. “Total” critique is thus ruled out of bounds, and along with it the possibility of deep-seated political transformation. But you do not need to be

outside a situation to submit it to criticism. In any case, the distinction here between being inside and outside can be dismantled. It is a feature of creatures like ourselves that being able to distance ourselves critically from the world is part of the way we are bound up with it.

The implicit certainties or taken-for-granted truths which underpin all our more formal reasoning are as obvious in the case of science as anywhere else. Among the assumptions that science takes for granted, for example, is the postulate that only “natural” explanations are to be ruled in. This may well be a wise supposition. It certainly rules out a lot of egregious nonsense. But it is indeed a postulate, not the upshot of a demonstrable truth. If a scientist suddenly caught sight of the red-rimmed eye of Lucifer squinting balefully up at her through the microscope, or at least caught sight of it a sufficient number of times under rigorously controlled conditions, she would be bound by the conventional wisdom of science to abandon this working assumption, or to conclude that Lucifer is a natural phenomenon.

Science, then, trades on certain articles of faith like any other form of knowledge. This much, at least, the postmodern skeptics of science have going for them—though one should bear in mind that humanists have always been prejudiced against scientists, and as far as postmodernism goes have simply shifted their grounds. Whereas scientists used to be regarded as unspeakable yokels from grammar schools with dandruff on their collars who thought Rimbaud was a

cinematic strongman, they have become in our own time the authoritarian custodians of absolute truth. They are peddlers of a noxious ideology known as objectivity, a notion which simply tarts up their ideological prejudices in acceptably disinterested guise. The opposite of science was once humanism; nowadays it is known as culturalism, a postmodern creed which postures as radical in the very act of striving violently to repress or eradicate Nature.

One does not need to subscribe to this travesty to note that science, like any other human affair, is indeed shot through with prejudice and partisanship, not to speak of ungrounded assumptions, unconscious biases, taken-for-granted truths, and beliefs too close to the eyeball to be objectified. Like religion, science is a culture, not just a set of procedures and hypotheses. Richard Dawkins declares that science is free of the main vice of religion, which is faith; but as Charles Taylor points out, “to hold that there are *no* assumptions in a scientist’s work which aren’t already based on evidence is surely a reflection of a *blind* faith, one that can’t even feel the occasional tremor of doubt.”¹¹ If the Virgin Mary were to put in an appearance at this very moment in the skies over New Haven, clutching the baby Jesus with one hand and nonchalantly distributing banknotes with the other, it would be more than the reputation of anyone laboring away in the Yale laboratories was worth to poke his or her head even fractionally out of the window.

There are, then, still a great many telescopes up which

science is churlishly reluctant to peer. Science has its high priests, sacred cows, revered scriptures, ideological exclusions, and rituals for suppressing dissent. To this extent, it is ridiculous to see it as the polar opposite of religion. There are those topics which in Foucaultian phrase are scientifically speaking “in the truth” at any given time, and those which happen for the moment not to be. I happen to know as a fact, for example, that the moon deeply affects human behavior, since as a mild species of lunatic I am always aware of when the moon is full even without looking (though I draw the line at baying or sprouting hair on my cheeks). I doubt, however, that scientists who valued their corporate grants would fall over themselves to investigate this remarkably well-evidenced phenomenon. It would be rather like a literary critic publishing a three-volume study of *Goosey Goosey Gander*.

Though Dawkins’s *The God Delusion* is astonishingly tight-lipped about the cock-ups and catastrophes of science (he castigates the Inquisition, for example, but not Hiroshima), most of us are aware that, like almost any interesting human pursuit from staging a play to running the economy, science is a lot more dicey, precarious, anomalous, and serendipitous than its publicity agents would have us believe, and that many of its practitioners will go to quite extraordinary lengths to preserve a tried and trusted hypothesis. *The God Delusion*, by contrast, manages only one or two shadowy gestures to the fallibility of the enterprise to which its author has so flamboyantly pinned his faith. On the horrors that science

and technology have wreaked upon humanity, he is predictably silent. Swap you the Inquisition for chemical warfare. Yet the Apocalypse, if it ever happens, is far more likely to be the upshot of technology than the work of the Almighty. In the long apocalyptic tradition of cosmic portents, fiery signs in the skies, and impending planetary doom, it was never envisaged that we might prove capable of bringing this about all by ourselves, without the slightest help from a wrathful deity. This, surely, should be a source of pride to cheerleaders for the human species like Ditchkins. Who needs an angry God to burn up the planet when as mature, self-sufficient human beings we are perfectly capable of doing the job ourselves?

None of these reservations about science should be taken as discrediting that loving, passionate, selfless, faithful, exhausting, profoundly ethical labor known as trying to get it right. In political life, it is a drudgery which can make the difference between life and death. This is one reason why one does not stumble across too many skeptics among the oppressed. Yet it is perfectly consistent with this claim to argue that all politics is ultimately faith-based. Trying to get it right is also a project with a religious history. Charles Taylor points out how the scientifically detached, disinterested subject of modernity has its origins in premodern religious asceticism, with its aloof *contemptus mundi*.¹² There is a curious sense in which knowing the world, for this theory of knowledge at least, involves a kind of refusal of it. Even so, there are those who for the sake of their own emancipation and well-being

need to know how things stand with them—for whom, in short, objectivity in some sense of the term is urgently in their interests. There are also those rather more privileged souls, some of them known as postmodernists, who have no such need, and who are thus free to view objectivity as an illusion.

So science is about faith as well—which is not all it shares with theology. Rather as the churches have largely betrayed their historical mission, so, one might argue, has a good deal of science. I myself was for twenty years a Fellow of Wadham College, Oxford, an institution which in the late seventeenth century was home to the illustrious Royal Society. One of the Society's luminaries, John Wilkins, was Warden of the college and a brother-in-law of Oliver Cromwell. Unlike most of the rest of Oxford, the college was on the progressive side of the Civil War, and suffered for it. Wadham's traditionally maverick politics stretched all the way from the trade union sympathies of college Fellow Frederick Harrison and his circle of nineteenth-century English Positivists, to the Bloomsbury-style nonconformism of Warden Maurice Bowra (who admittedly scorned science) in the twentieth century. I would be glad to think that a radical English school might be appended to this list. Wadham's political dissidence had its roots in its radical scientific lineage, which prized freedom of thought and inquiry over loyalty to prelate and monarch. It is this progressive history which the postmodern skeptics of science tend to ignore, just as it is the fact that science belongs to a specific social history that the abstract rationalists too easily

forget. Like religion, a good deal of science has betrayed its revolutionary origins, as the pliable tool of the transnational corporations and the military-industrial complex. But this should not induce us to forget its emancipatory history. Like liberalism, socialism, and religion, science stands under the judgment of its own finest traditions.

Some of those these days who dislike religion do so because they are suspicious of conviction as such, which is not quite what Voltaire found so offensive about it. In a pluralistic age, conviction is thought to be at odds with tolerance; whereas the truth is that conviction is part of what one is supposed to tolerate, so that the one would not exist without the other. Postmodernism is allergic to the idea of certainty, and makes a great deal of theoretical fuss over this rather modest, everyday notion. As such, it is in some ways the flip side of fundamentalism, which also makes a fuss about certainty, but in an approving kind of way. Some postmodern thought suspects that all certainty is authoritarian. It is nervous of people who sound passionately committed to what they say. In this, it represents among other things an excessive reaction to fascism and Stalinism. The totalitarian politics of the twentieth century did not only launch an assault on truth in their own time; they also helped to undermine the idea of truth for future generations. The line between holding certain noxious kinds of belief, and holding strong beliefs at all, then becomes dangerously unclear. Conviction itself is condemned as dogmatic.

Certainties may indeed destroy. But they may also liberate, a point which Jacques Derrida, with his quasi-pathological distaste for the determinate, never seemed capable of grasping. There is nothing oppressive about being certain that your wages have just been cut. For their part, liberals hold the conviction that they should tolerate other people's convictions. On the whole, they are more concerned with the fact of other people's convictions than with their content. They can even be more zealous in the cause of other people's convictions than in their own. Our age is accordingly divided between those who believe far too much and those who believe far too little—or as Milan Kundera would put it, between the angelic and the demonic.¹³ Each party draws sustenance from the other. The age is equally divided between a technocratic reason which subordinates value to fact, and a fundamentalist reason which replaces fact with value.

Faith—any kind of faith—is not in the first place a matter of choice. It is more common to find oneself believing something than to make a conscious decision to do so—or at least to make such a conscious decision because you find yourself leaning that way already. This is not, needless to say, a matter of determinism. It is rather a question of being gripped by a commitment from which one finds oneself unable to walk away. It is not primarily a question of the will, at least as the modern era imagines that much fetishized faculty. Such a cult of the will characterizes the United States. The sky's the limit, never say never, you can crack it if you try, you can be

anything you want: such are the delusions of the American dream. For some in the USA, the C-word is “can’t.” Negativity is often looked upon there as a kind of thought crime. Not since the advent of socialist realism has the world witnessed such pathological upbeatness. This Faustian belief in Man’s infinite capabilities is by no means to be confused with the virtue of hope. As long as it exists, however, belief will continue to be falsely linked to so-called acts of will, in a voluntaristic misunderstanding of how we come by our convictions.

The Christian way of indicating that faith is not in the end a question of choice is the notion of grace. Like the world itself from a Christian viewpoint, faith is a gift. This means among other things that Christians are not in conscious possession of all the reasons why they believe in God. But neither is anyone in conscious possession of all the reasons why they believe in keeping fit, the supreme value of the individual, or the importance of being sincere. Only ultrarationalists imagine that they need to be. Because faith is not wholly conscious, it is uncommon to abandon it simply by taking thought. Too much else would have to be altered as well. It is not usual for a life-long conservative suddenly to become a revolutionary because a thought has struck him. This is not to say that faith is closed to evidence, as Dawkins wrongly considers, or to deny that one can come to change one’s mind about one’s beliefs. We may not choose our beliefs as we choose our starters; but this is not to say that we are just the helpless prisoners of them, as neopragmatists like Stanley Fish tend to imagine. Deter-

minism is not the only alternative to voluntarism. It is just that more is involved in changing really deep-seated beliefs than just changing your mind. The rationalist tends to mistake the tenacity of faith (other people's faith, anyway) for irrational stubbornness rather than for the sign of a certain interior depth, one which encompasses reason but also transcends it. Because certain of our commitments are constitutive of who we are, we cannot alter them without what Christianity traditionally calls a conversion, which involves a lot more than just swapping one opinion for another. This is one reason why other people's faith can look like plain irrationalism, which indeed it sometimes is.



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