

societies. All politicians must get used to disrespectful cartoons of their faces, and nobody riots in their defence. What is so special about religion that we grant it such uniquely privileged respect? As H. L. Mencken said: 'We must respect the other fellow's religion, but only in the sense and to the extent that we respect his theory that his wife is beautiful and his children smart.'

It is in the light of the unparalleled presumption of respect for religion* that I make my own disclaimer for this book. I shall not go out of my way to offend, but nor shall I don kid gloves to handle religion any more gently than I would handle anything else.

* A stunning example of such 'respect' was reported in the *New York Times* while this paperback was in proof. In January 2007, a German Muslim woman had applied for a fast-track divorce on the grounds that her husband, from the very start of the marriage, repeatedly and seriously beat her. While not denying the facts, judge Christa Datz-Winter turned down the application, citing the Qur'an. 'In a remarkable ruling that underlines the tension between Muslim customs and European laws, the judge, Christa Datz-Winter, said that the couple came from a Moroccan cultural milieu, in which she said it was common for husbands to beat their wives. The Koran, she wrote, sanctions such physical abuse' (*New York Times*, 23 March 2007). This incredible story came to light in March 2007 when the unfortunate woman's lawyer disclosed it. To its credit, the Frankfurt court promptly removed Judge Datz-Winter from the case. Nevertheless, the *New York Times* article concludes by quoting a suggestion that the episode will do great damage to other Muslim women suffering domestic abuse: 'Many are already afraid of going to court against their spouses. There have been a string of so-called honor-killings here, in which Turkish Muslim men have murdered women.' Judge Datz-Winter's motivation was put down to 'cultural sensitivity', but there is another name by which you could call it: patronizing insult. 'Of course we Europeans wouldn't dream of behaving like this, but wife-beating is part of "their culture", sanctioned by "their religion", and we should "respect" it.'

CHAPTER 2

THE GOD HYPOTHESIS

*The religion of one age is the
literary entertainment of the next.*

— RALPH WALDO EMERSON

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully. Those of us schooled from infancy in his ways can become desensitized to their horror. A *naïf* blessed with the perspective of innocence has a clearer perception. Winston Churchill's son Randolph somehow contrived to remain ignorant of scripture until Evelyn Waugh and a brother officer, in a vain attempt to keep Churchill quiet when they were posted together during the war, bet him he couldn't read the entire Bible in a fortnight: 'Unhappily it has not had the result we hoped. He has never read any of it before and is hideously excited; keeps reading quotations aloud "I say I bet you didn't know this came in the Bible . . ." or merely slapping his side & chortling "God, isn't God a shit!"'¹⁶ Thomas Jefferson – better read – was of a similar opinion, describing the God of Moses as 'a being of terrific character – cruel, vindictive, capricious and unjust'.

It is unfair to attack such an easy target. The God Hypothesis should not stand or fall with its most unlovely instantiation,

Yahweh, nor his insipidly opposite Christian face, 'Gentle Jesus meek and mild'. (To be fair, this milksop *persona* owes more to his Victorian followers than to Jesus himself. Could anything be more mawkishly nauseating than Mrs C. F. Alexander's 'Christian children all must be / Mild, obedient, good as he'?) I am not attacking the particular qualities of Yahweh, or Jesus, or Allah, or any other specific god such as Baal, Zeus or Wotan. Instead I shall define the God Hypothesis more defensibly: *there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.* This book will advocate an alternative view: *any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution.* Creative intelligences, being evolved, necessarily arrive late in the universe, and therefore cannot be responsible for designing it. God, in the sense defined, is a delusion; and, as later chapters will show, a pernicious delusion.

Not surprisingly, since it is founded on local traditions of private revelation rather than evidence, the God Hypothesis comes in many versions. Historians of religion recognize a progression from primitive tribal animisms, through polytheisms such as those of the Greeks, Romans and Norsemen, to monotheisms such as Judaism and its derivatives, Christianity and Islam.

POLYTHEISM

It is not clear why the change from polytheism to monotheism should be assumed to be a self-evidently progressive improvement. But it widely is – an assumption that provoked Ibn Warraq (author of *Why I Am Not a Muslim*) wittily to conjecture that monotheism is in its turn doomed to subtract one more god and become atheism. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* dismisses polytheism and atheism in the same insouciant breath: 'Formal dogmatic atheism is self-refuting, and has

never *de facto* won the reasoned assent of any considerable number of men. Nor can polytheism, however easily it may take hold of the popular imagination, ever satisfy the mind of a philosopher.'¹⁷

Monotheistic chauvinism was until recently written into the charity law of both England and Scotland, discriminating against polytheistic religions in granting tax-exempt status, while allowing an easy ride to charities whose object was to promote monotheistic religion, sparing them the rigorous vetting quite properly required of secular charities. It was my ambition to persuade a member of Britain's respected Hindu community to come forward and bring a civil action to test this snobbish discrimination against polytheism.

Far better, of course, would be to abandon the promotion of religion altogether as grounds for charitable status. The benefits of this to society would be great, especially in the United States, where the sums of tax-free money sucked in by churches, and polishing the heels of already well-heeled televangelists, reach levels that could fairly be described as obscene. The aptly named Oral Roberts once told his television audience that God would kill him unless they gave him \$8 million. Almost unbelievably, it worked. Tax-free! Roberts himself is still going strong, as is 'Oral Roberts University' of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Its buildings, valued at \$250 million, were directly commissioned by God himself in these words: 'Raise up your students to hear My voice, to go where My light is dim, where My voice is heard small, and My healing power is not known, even to the uttermost bounds of the Earth. Their work will exceed yours, and in this I am well pleased.'

On reflection, my imagined Hindu litigator would have been as likely to play the 'If you can't beat them join them' card. His polytheism isn't really polytheism but monotheism in disguise. There is only one God – Lord Brahma the creator, Lord Vishnu the preserver, Lord Shiva the destroyer, the goddesses Saraswati, Laxmi and Parvati (wives of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva), Lord Ganesh the elephant god, and

hundreds of others, all are just different manifestations or incarnations of the one God.

Christians should warm to such sophistry. Rivers of medieval ink, not to mention blood, have been squandered over the 'mystery' of the Trinity, and in suppressing deviations such as the Arian heresy. Arius of Alexandria, in the fourth century AD, denied that Jesus was *consubstantial* (i.e. of the same substance or essence) with God. What on earth could that possibly mean, you are probably asking? Substance? What 'substance'? What exactly do you mean by 'essence'? 'Very little' seems the only reasonable reply. Yet the controversy split Christendom down the middle for a century, and the Emperor Constantine ordered that all copies of Arius's book should be burned. Splitting Christendom by splitting hairs – such has ever been the way of theology.

Do we have one God in three parts, or three Gods in one? The *Catholic Encyclopedia* clears up the matter for us, in a masterpiece of theological close reasoning:

In the unity of the Godhead there are three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, these Three Persons being truly distinct one from another. Thus, in the words of the Athanasian Creed: 'the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods but one God.'

As if that were not clear enough, the *Encyclopedia* quotes the third-century theologian St Gregory the Miracle Worker:

There is therefore nothing created, nothing subject to another in the Trinity: nor is there anything that has been added as though it once had not existed, but had entered afterwards: therefore the Father has never been without the Son, nor the Son without the Spirit: and this same Trinity is immutable and unalterable forever.

Whatever miracles may have earned St Gregory his nickname, they were not miracles of honest lucidity. His words convey the characteristically obscurantist flavour of theology, which – unlike science or most other branches of human scholarship – has not moved on in eighteen centuries. Thomas Jefferson, as so often, got it right when he said, 'Ridicule is the only weapon which can be used against unintelligible propositions. Ideas must be distinct before reason can act upon them; and no man ever had a distinct idea of the trinity. It is the mere Abracadabra of the mountebanks calling themselves the priests of Jesus.'

The other thing I cannot help remarking upon is the overweening confidence with which the religious assert minute details for which they neither have, nor could have, any evidence. Perhaps it is the very fact that there is no evidence to support theological opinions, either way, that fosters the characteristic draconian hostility towards those of slightly different opinion, especially, as it happens, in this very field of Trinitarianism.

Jefferson heaped ridicule on the doctrine that, as he put it, 'There are three Gods', in his critique of Calvinism. But it is especially the Roman Catholic branch of Christianity that pushes its recurrent flirtation with polytheism towards runaway inflation. The Trinity is (are?) joined by Mary, 'Queen of Heaven', a goddess in all but name, who surely runs God himself a close second as a target of prayers. The pantheon is further swollen by an army of saints, whose intercessory power makes them, if not demigods, well worth approaching on their own specialist subjects. The Catholic Community Forum helpfully lists 5,120 saints,¹⁸ together with their areas of expertise, which include abdominal pains, abuse victims, anorexia, arms dealers, blacksmiths, broken bones, bomb technicians and bowel disorders, to venture no further than the Bs. And we mustn't forget the four Choirs of Angelic Hosts, arrayed in nine orders: Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels (heads of all hosts), and just plain old Angels, including our closest friends, the ever-watchful

Guardian Angels. What impresses me about Catholic mythology is partly its tasteless kitsch but mostly the airy nonchalance with which these people make up the details as they go along. It is just shamelessly invented.

Pope John Paul II created more saints than all his predecessors of the past several centuries put together, and he had a special affinity with the Virgin Mary. His polytheistic hankerings were dramatically demonstrated in 1981 when he suffered an assassination attempt in Rome, and attributed his survival to intervention by Our Lady of Fatima: 'A maternal hand guided the bullet.' One cannot help wondering why she didn't guide it to miss him altogether. Others might think the team of surgeons who operated on him for six hours deserved at least a share of the credit; but perhaps their hands, too, were maternally guided. The relevant point is that it wasn't just Our Lady who, in the Pope's opinion, guided the bullet, but specifically Our Lady of *Fatima*. Presumably Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady of Medjugorje, Our Lady of Akita, Our Lady of Zeitoun, Our Lady of Garabandal and Our Lady of Knock were busy on other errands at the time.

How did the Greeks, the Romans and the Vikings cope with such polytheological conundrums? Was Venus just another name for Aphrodite, or were they two distinct goddesses of love? Was Thor with his hammer a manifestation of Wotan, or a separate god? Who cares? Life is too short to bother with the distinction between one figment of the imagination and many. Having gestured towards polytheism to cover myself against a charge of neglect, I shall say no more about it. For brevity I shall refer to all deities, whether poly- or monotheistic, as simply 'God'. I am also conscious that the Abrahamic God is (to put it mildly) aggressively male, and this too I shall accept as a convention in my use of pronouns. More sophisticated theologians proclaim the sexlessness of God, while some feminist theologians seek to redress historic injustices by designating her female. But what, after all, is the difference between a

non-existent female and a non-existent male? I suppose that, in the ditzily unreal intersection of theology and feminism, existence might indeed be a less salient attribute than gender.

I am aware that critics of religion can be attacked for failing to credit the fertile diversity of traditions and world-views that have been called religious. Anthropologically informed works, from Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough* to Pascal Boyer's *Religion Explained* or Scott Atran's *In Gods We Trust*, fascinatingly document the bizarre phenomenology of superstition and ritual. Read such books and marvel at the richness of human gullibility.

But that is not the way of this book. I decry supernaturalism in all its forms, and the most effective way to proceed will be to concentrate on the form most likely to be familiar to my readers – the form that impinges most threateningly on all our societies. Most of my readers will have been reared in one or another of today's three 'great' monotheistic religions (four if you count Mormonism), all of which trace themselves back to the mythological patriarch Abraham, and it will be convenient to keep this family of traditions in mind throughout the rest of the book.

This is as good a moment as any to forestall an inevitable retort to the book, one that would otherwise – as sure as night follows day – turn up in a review: 'The God that Dawkins doesn't believe in is a God that I don't believe in either. I don't believe in an old man in the sky with a long white beard.' That old man is an irrelevant distraction and his beard is as tedious as it is long. Indeed, the distraction is worse than irrelevant. Its very silliness is calculated to distract attention from the fact that what the speaker really believes is not a whole lot less silly. I know you don't believe in an old bearded man sitting on a cloud, so let's not waste any more time on that. I am not attacking any particular version of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented.

MONOTHEISM

The great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament, three anti-human religions have evolved – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These are sky-god religions. They are, literally, patriarchal – God is the Omnipotent Father – hence the loathing of women for 2,000 years in those countries afflicted by the sky-god and his earthly male delegates.

– GORE VIDAL

The oldest of the three Abrahamic religions, and the clear ancestor of the other two, is Judaism: originally a tribal cult of a single fiercely unpleasant God, morbidly obsessed with sexual restrictions, with the smell of charred flesh, with his own superiority over rival gods and with the exclusiveness of his chosen desert tribe. During the Roman occupation of Palestine, Christianity was founded by Paul of Tarsus as a less ruthlessly monotheistic sect of Judaism and a less exclusive one, which looked outwards from the Jews to the rest of the world. Several centuries later, Muhammad and his followers reverted to the uncompromising monotheism of the Jewish original, but not its exclusiveness, and founded Islam upon a new holy book, the Koran or Qur'an, adding a powerful ideology of military conquest to spread the faith. Christianity, too, was spread by the sword, wielded first by Roman hands after the Emperor Constantine raised it from eccentric cult to official religion, then by the Crusaders, and later by the *conquistadores* and other European invaders and colonists, with missionary accompaniment. For most of my purposes, all three Abrahamic religions can be treated as indistinguishable. Unless otherwise stated, I shall have Christianity mostly in mind, but only because it is the version with which I happen to be most familiar. For my

purposes the differences matter less than the similarities. And I shall not be concerned at all with other religions such as Buddhism or Confucianism. Indeed, there is something to be said for treating these not as religions at all but as ethical systems or philosophies of life.

The simple definition of the God Hypothesis with which I began has to be substantially fleshed out if it is to accommodate the Abrahamic God. He not only created the universe; he is a *personal* God dwelling within it, or perhaps outside it (whatever that might mean), possessing the unpleasantly human qualities to which I have alluded.

Personal qualities, whether pleasant or unpleasant, form no part of the deist god of Voltaire and Thomas Paine. Compared with the Old Testament's psychotic delinquent, the deist God of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment is an altogether grander being: worthy of his cosmic creation, loftily unconcerned with human affairs, sublimely aloof from our private thoughts and hopes, caring nothing for our messy sins or mumbled contritions. The deist God is a physicist to end all physics, the alpha and omega of mathematicians, the apotheosis of designers; a hyper-engineer who set up the laws and constants of the universe, fine-tuned them with exquisite precision and foreknowledge, detonated what we would now call the hot big bang, retired and was never heard from again.

In times of stronger faith, deists have been reviled as indistinguishable from atheists. Susan Jacoby, in *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, lists a choice selection of the epithets hurled at poor Tom Paine: 'Judas, reptile, hog, mad dog, souse, louse, archbeast, brute, liar, and of course infidel'. Paine died abandoned (with the honourable exception of Jefferson) by political former friends embarrassed by his anti-Christian views. Nowadays, the ground has shifted so far that deists are more likely to be contrasted with atheists and lumped with theists. They do, after all, believe in a supreme intelligence who created the universe.

SECULARISM, THE FOUNDING FATHERS AND THE RELIGION OF AMERICA

It is conventional to assume that the Founding Fathers of the American Republic were deists. No doubt many of them were, although it has been argued that the greatest of them might have been atheists. Certainly their writings on religion in their own time leave me in no doubt that most of them would have been atheists in ours. But whatever their individual religious views in their own time, the one thing they collectively were is *secularists*, and this is the topic to which I turn in this section, beginning with a – perhaps surprising – quotation from Senator Barry Goldwater in 1981, clearly showing how staunchly that presidential candidate and hero of American conservatism upheld the secular tradition of the Republic's foundation:

There is no position on which people are so immovable as their religious beliefs. There is no more powerful ally one can claim in a debate than Jesus Christ, or God, or Allah, or whatever one calls this supreme being. But like any powerful weapon, the use of God's name on one's behalf should be used sparingly. The religious factions that are growing throughout our land are not using their religious clout with wisdom. They are trying to force government leaders into following their position 100 percent. If you disagree with these religious groups on a particular moral issue, they complain, they threaten you with a loss of money or votes or both. I'm frankly sick and tired of the political preachers across this country telling me as a citizen that if I want to be a moral person, I must believe in A, B, C, and D. Just who do they think they are? And from where do they presume to claim the right to dictate their moral beliefs to me? And I am even more angry

as a legislator who must endure the threats of every religious group who thinks it has some God-granted right to control my vote on every roll call in the Senate. I am warning them today: I will fight them every step of the way if they try to dictate their moral convictions to all Americans in the name of conservatism.¹⁹

The religious views of the Founding Fathers are of great interest to propagandists of today's American right, anxious to push their version of history. Contrary to their view, the fact that the United States was *not* founded as a Christian nation was early stated in the terms of a treaty with Tripoli, drafted in 1796 under George Washington and signed by John Adams in 1797:

As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion; as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquillity, of Musselmen; and as the said States never have entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mehomitan nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.

The opening words of this quotation would cause uproar in today's Washington ascendancy. Yet Ed Buckner has convincingly demonstrated that they caused no dissent at the time,²⁰ among either politicians or public.

The paradox has often been noted that the United States, founded in secularism, is now the most religious country in Christendom, while England, with an established church headed by its constitutional monarch, is among the least. I am continually asked why this is, and I do not know. I suppose it is

possible that England has wearied of religion after an appalling history of interfaith violence, with Protestants and Catholics alternately gaining the upper hand and systematically murdering the other lot. Another suggestion stems from the observation that America is a nation of immigrants. A colleague points out to me that immigrants, uprooted from the stability and comfort of an extended family in Europe, could well have embraced a church as a kind of kin-substitute on alien soil. It is an interesting idea, worth researching further. There is no doubt that many Americans see their own local church as an important unit of identity, which does indeed have some of the attributes of an extended family.

Yet another hypothesis is that the religiosity of America stems paradoxically from the secularism of its constitution. Precisely because America is legally secular, religion has become free enterprise. Rival churches compete for congregations – not least for the fat tithes that they bring – and the competition is waged with all the aggressive hard-sell techniques of the marketplace. What works for soap flakes works for God, and the result is something approaching religious mania among today's less educated classes. In England, by contrast, religion under the aegis of the established church has become little more than a pleasant social pastime, scarcely recognizable as religious at all. This English tradition is nicely expressed by Giles Fraser, an Anglican vicar who doubles as a philosophy tutor at Oxford, writing in the *Guardian*. Fraser's article is subtitled 'The establishment of the Church of England took God out of religion, but there are risks in a more vigorous approach to faith':

There was a time when the country vicar was a staple of the English dramatis personae. This tea-drinking, gentle eccentric, with his polished shoes and kindly manners, represented a type of religion that didn't make non-religious people uncomfortable. He wouldn't break into an existential sweat or press you

against a wall to ask if you were saved, still less launch crusades from the pulpit or plant roadside bombs in the name of some higher power.²¹

(Shades of Betjeman's 'Our Padre', which I quoted at the beginning of Chapter 1.) Fraser goes on to say that 'the nice country vicar in effect inoculated vast swaths of the English against Christianity'. He ends his article by lamenting a more recent trend in the Church of England to take religion seriously again, and his last sentence is a warning: 'the worry is that we may release the genie of English religious fanaticism from the establishment box in which it has been dormant for centuries'.

The genie of religious fanaticism is rampant in present-day America, and the Founding Fathers would have been horrified. Whether or not it is right to embrace the paradox and blame the secular constitution that they devised, the founders most certainly were secularists who believed in keeping religion out of politics, and that is enough to place them firmly on the side of those who object, for example, to ostentatious displays of the Ten Commandments in government-owned public places. But it is tantalizing to speculate that at least some of the Founders might have gone beyond deism. Might they have been agnostics or even out-and-out atheists? The following statement of Jefferson is indistinguishable from what we would now call agnosticism:

To talk of immaterial existences is to talk of *nothings*. To say that the human soul, angels, god, are immaterial, is to say they are nothings, or that there is no god, no angels, no soul. I cannot reason otherwise . . . without plunging into the fathomless abyss of dreams and phantasms. I am satisfied, and sufficiently occupied with the things which are, without tormenting or troubling myself about those which may indeed be, but of which I have no evidence.

Christopher Hitchens, in his biography *Thomas Jefferson: Author of America*, thinks it likely that Jefferson was an atheist, even in his own time when it was much harder:

As to whether he was an atheist, we must reserve judgment if only because of the prudence he was compelled to observe during his political life. But as he had written to his nephew, Peter Carr, as early as 1787, one must not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences. 'If it ends in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in this exercise, and the love of others which it will procure you.'

I find the following advice of Jefferson, again in his letter to Peter Carr, moving:

Shake off all the fears of servile prejudices, under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call on her tribunal for every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason than that of blindfolded fear.

Remarks of Jefferson's such as 'Christianity is the most perverted system that ever shone on man' are compatible with deism but also with atheism. So is James Madison's robust anti-clericalism: 'During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What has been its fruits? More or less, in all places, pride and indolence in the clergy; ignorance and servility in the laity; in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution.' The same could be said of Benjamin Franklin's 'Lighthouses are more useful than churches.' John Adams seems to have been a deist of a

strongly anti-clerical stripe ('The frightful engines of ecclesiastical councils . . .'), and he delivered himself of some splendid tirades against Christianity in particular: 'As I understand the Christian religion, it was, and is, a revelation. But how has it happened that millions of fables, tales, legends, have been blended with both Jewish and Christian revelation that have made them the most bloody religion that ever existed?' And, in another letter, this time to Jefferson, 'I almost shudder at the thought of alluding to the most fatal example of the abuses of grief which the history of mankind has preserved – the Cross. Consider what calamities that engine of grief has produced!'

Whether Jefferson and his colleagues were theists, deists, agnostics or atheists, they were also passionate secularists who believed that the religious opinions of a President, or lack of them, were entirely his own business. All the Founding Fathers, whatever their private religious beliefs, would have been aghast to read the journalist Robert Sherman's report of George Bush Senior's answer when Sherman asked him whether he recognized the equal citizenship and patriotism of Americans who are atheists: 'No, I don't know that atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God.'²² Assuming Sherman's account to be accurate (unfortunately he didn't use a tape-recorder, and no other newspaper ran the story at the time), try the experiment of replacing 'atheists' with 'Jews' or 'Muslims' or 'Blacks'. That gives the measure of the prejudice and discrimination that American atheists have to endure today. Natalie Angier's 'Confessions of a lonely atheist' is a sad and moving description, in the *New York Times*, of her feelings of isolation as an atheist in today's America.²³ But the isolation of American atheists is an illusion, assiduously cultivated by prejudice. Atheists in America are more numerous than most people realize. As I said in the Preface, American atheists far outnumber religious Jews, yet the Jewish lobby is notoriously one of the most formidably influential in Washington. What

might American atheists achieve if they organized themselves properly?*

David Mills, in his admirable book *Atheist Universe*, tells a story which you would dismiss as an unrealistic caricature of police bigotry if it were fiction. A Christian faith-healer ran a 'Miracle Crusade' which came to Mills's home town once a year. Among other things, the faith-healer encouraged diabetics to throw away their insulin, and cancer patients to give up their chemotherapy and pray for a miracle instead. Reasonably enough, Mills decided to organize a peaceful demonstration to warn people. But he made the mistake of going to the police to tell them of his intention and ask for police protection against possible attacks from supporters of the faith-healer. The first police officer to whom he spoke asked, 'Is you gonna protest fir him or 'gin him?' (meaning for or against the faith-healer). When Mills replied, 'Against him,' the policeman said that he himself planned to attend the rally and intended to spit personally in Mills's face as he marched past Mills's demonstration.

Mills decided to try his luck with a second police officer. This one said that if any of the faith-healer's supporters violently confronted Mills, the officer would arrest Mills because he was 'trying to interfere with God's work'. Mills went home and tried telephoning the police station, in the hope of finding more sympathy at a senior level. He was finally connected to a sergeant who said, 'To hell with you, Buddy. No policeman wants to protect a goddamned atheist. I hope somebody bloodies you up good.' Apparently adverbs were in short supply in this police station, along with the milk of human kindness and a sense of duty. Mills relates that he spoke to about seven or eight policemen that day. None of them was helpful, and most of them directly threatened Mills with violence.

* Tom Flynn, Editor of *Free Inquiry*, makes the point forcefully ('Secularism's breakthrough moment', *Free Inquiry* 26: 3, 2006, 16-17): 'If atheists are lonely and downtrodden, we have only ourselves to blame. Numerically, we are strong. Let's start punching our weight.'

Anecdotes of such prejudice against atheists abound, but Margaret Downey, founder of the Anti-Discrimination Support Network (ADSN), maintains systematic records of such cases through the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia.²⁴ Her database of incidents, categorized under community, schools, workplace, media, family and government, includes examples of harassment, loss of jobs, shunning by family and even murder.²⁵ Downey's documented evidence of the hatred and misunderstanding of atheists makes it easy to believe that it is, indeed, virtually impossible for an honest atheist to win a public election in America. There are 435 members of the House of Representatives and 100 members of the Senate. Assuming that the majority of these 535 individuals are an educated sample of the population, it is statistically all but inevitable that a substantial number of them must be atheists. They must have lied, or concealed their true feelings, in order to get elected. Who can blame them, given the electorate they had to convince? It is universally accepted that an admission of atheism would be instant political suicide for any presidential candidate.*

These facts about today's political climate in the United States, and what they imply, would have horrified Jefferson, Washington, Madison, Adams and all their friends. Whether they were atheists, agnostics, deists or Christians, they would have recoiled in horror from the theocrats of early 21st-century Washington. They would have been drawn instead to the secularist founding fathers of post-colonial India, especially the religious Gandhi ('I am a Hindu, I am a Moslem, I am a Jew, I am a Christian, I am a Buddhist!'), and the atheist Nehru:

* Stop Press: in March 2007, Representative Pete Stark, US Congressman for the California 13th District, publicly acknowledged his lack of theistic belief (http://www.secular.org/news/pete_stark_070312.html). Let's hope other American politicians will now follow this brave man's example. Come on, dive in, the water's cold but refreshing.

The spectacle of what is called religion, or at any rate organised religion, in India and elsewhere, has filled me with horror and I have frequently condemned it and wished to make a clean sweep of it. Almost always it seemed to stand for blind belief and reaction, dogma and bigotry, superstition, exploitation and the preservation of vested interests.

Nehru's definition of the secular India of Gandhi's dream (would that it had been realized, instead of the partitioning of their country amid an interfaith bloodbath) might almost have been ghosted by Jefferson himself:

We talk about a secular India . . . Some people think that it means something opposed to religion. That obviously is not correct. What it means is that it is a State which honours all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities; India has a long history of religious tolerance . . . In a country like India, which has many faiths and religions, no real nationalism can be built up except on the basis of secularity.²⁶

The deist God, often associated with the Founding Fathers, is certainly an improvement over the monster of the Bible. Unfortunately it is scarcely more likely that he exists, or ever did. In any of its forms the God Hypothesis is unnecessary.* The God Hypothesis is also very close to being ruled out by the laws of probability. I shall come to that in Chapter 4, after dealing with the alleged proofs of the existence of God in Chapter 3. Meanwhile I turn to agnosticism, and the erroneous notion that the existence or non-existence of God is an untouchable question, forever beyond the reach of science.

* 'Sire, I had no need of that hypothesis,' as Laplace said when Napoleon wondered how the famous mathematician had managed to write his book without mentioning God.

THE POVERTY OF AGNOSTICISM

The robust Muscular Christian haranguing us from the pulpit of my old school chapel admitted a sneaking regard for atheists. They at least had the courage of their misguided convictions. What this preacher couldn't stand was agnostics: namby-pamby, mushy pap, weak-tea, weedy, pallid fence-sitters. He was partly right, but for wholly the wrong reason. In the same vein, according to Quentin de la Bédoyère, the Catholic historian Hugh Ross Williamson 'respected the committed religious believer and also the committed atheist. He reserved his contempt for the wishy-washy boneless mediocrities who flapped around in the middle.'²⁷

There is nothing wrong with being agnostic in cases where we lack evidence one way or the other. It is the reasonable position. Carl Sagan was proud to be agnostic when asked whether there was life elsewhere in the universe. When he refused to commit himself, his interlocutor pressed him for a 'gut feeling' and he immortally replied: 'But I try not to think with my gut. Really, it's okay to reserve judgment until the evidence is in.'²⁸ The question of extraterrestrial life is open. Good arguments can be mounted both ways, and we lack the evidence to do more than shade the probabilities one way or the other. Agnosticism, of a kind, is an appropriate stance on many scientific questions, such as what caused the end-Permian extinction, the greatest mass extinction in fossil history. It could have been a meteorite strike like the one that, with greater likelihood on present evidence, caused the later extinction of the dinosaurs. But it could have been any of various other possible causes, or a combination. Agnosticism about the causes of both these mass extinctions is reasonable. How about the question of God? Should we be agnostic about him too? Many have said definitely yes, often with an air of conviction that verges on protesting too much. Are they right?

I'll begin by distinguishing two kinds of agnosticism. TAP, or

Temporary Agnosticism in Practice, is the legitimate fence-sitting where there really is a definite answer, one way or the other, but we so far lack the evidence to reach it (or don't understand the evidence, or haven't time to read the evidence, etc.). TAP would be a reasonable stance towards the Permian extinction. There is a truth out there and one day we hope to know it, though for the moment we don't.

But there is also a deeply inescapable kind of fence-sitting, which I shall call PAP (Permanent Agnosticism in Principle). The fact that the acronym spells a word used by that old school preacher is (almost) accidental. The PAP style of agnosticism is appropriate for questions that can never be answered, no matter how much evidence we gather, because the very idea of evidence is not applicable. The question exists on a different plane, or in a different dimension, beyond the zones where evidence can reach. An example might be that philosophical chestnut, the question whether you see red as I do. Maybe your red is my green, or something completely different from any colour that I can imagine. Philosophers cite this question as one that can never be answered, no matter what new evidence might one day become available. And some scientists and other intellectuals are convinced – too eagerly in my view – that the question of God's existence belongs in the forever inaccessible PAP category. From this, as we shall see, they often make the illogical deduction that the hypothesis of God's existence, and the hypothesis of his non-existence, have exactly equal probability of being right. The view that I shall defend is very different: agnosticism about the existence of God belongs firmly in the temporary or TAP category. Either he exists or he doesn't. It is a scientific question; one day we may know the answer, and meanwhile we can say something pretty strong about the probability.

In the history of ideas, there are examples of questions being answered that had earlier been judged forever out of science's reach. In 1835 the celebrated French philosopher Auguste Comte wrote, of the stars: 'We shall never be able to study, by

any method, their chemical composition or their mineralogical structure.' Yet even before Comte had set down these words, Fraunhofer had begun using his spectroscope to analyse the chemical composition of the sun. Now spectroscopists daily confound Comte's agnosticism with their long-distance analyses of the precise chemical composition of even distant stars.²⁹ Whatever the exact status of Comte's astronomical agnosticism, this cautionary tale suggests, at the very least, that we should hesitate before proclaiming the eternal verity of agnosticism too loudly. Nevertheless, when it comes to God, a great many philosophers and scientists are glad to do so, beginning with the inventor of the word itself, T. H. Huxley.³⁰

Huxley explained his coining while rising to a personal attack that it had provoked. The Principal of King's College, London, the Reverend Dr Wace, had poured scorn on Huxley's 'cowardly agnosticism':

He may prefer to call himself an agnostic; but his real name is an older one – he is an infidel; that is to say, an unbeliever. The word infidel, perhaps, carries an unpleasant significance. Perhaps it is right that it should. It is, and it ought to be, an unpleasant thing for a man to have to say plainly that he does not believe in Jêsus Christ.

Huxley was not the man to let that sort of provocation pass him by, and his reply in 1889 was as robustly scathing as we should expect (although never departing from scrupulous good manners: as Darwin's Bulldog, his teeth were sharpened by urbane Victorian irony). Eventually, having dealt Dr Wace his just comeuppance and buried the remains, Huxley returned to the word 'agnostic' and explained how he first came by it. Others, he noted,

were quite sure they had attained a certain 'gnosis' – had, more or less successfully, solved the problem of

existence; while I was quite sure I had not, and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble. And, with Hume and Kant on my side, I could not think myself presumptuous in holding fast by that opinion . . . So I took thought, and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of 'agnostic'.

Later in his speech, Huxley went on to explain that agnostics have no creed, not even a negative one.

Agnosticism, in fact, is not a creed, but a method, the essence of which lies in the rigorous application of a single principle. . . . Positively the principle may be expressed: In matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration. And negatively: In matters of the intellect, do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable. That I take to be the agnostic faith, which if a man keep whole and undefiled, he shall not be ashamed to look the universe in the face, whatever the future may have in store for him.

To a scientist these are noble words, and one doesn't criticize T. H. Huxley lightly. But Huxley, in his concentration upon the absolute impossibility of proving or disproving God, seems to have been ignoring the shading of *probability*. The fact that we can neither prove nor disprove the existence of something does not put existence and non-existence on an even footing. I don't think Huxley would disagree, and I suspect that when he appeared to do so he was bending over backwards to concede a point, in the interests of securing another one. We have all done this at one time or another.

Contrary to Huxley, I shall suggest that the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other. Even if hard to test in

practice, it belongs in the same TAP or temporary agnosticism box as the controversies over the Permian and Cretaceous extinctions. God's existence or non-existence is a scientific fact about the universe, discoverable in principle if not in practice. If he existed and chose to reveal it, God himself could clinch the argument, noisily and unequivocally, in his favour. And even if God's existence is never proved or disproved with certainty one way or the other, available evidence and reasoning may yield an estimate of probability far from 50 per cent.

Let us, then, take the idea of a spectrum of probabilities seriously, and place human judgements about the existence of God along it, between two extremes of opposite certainty. The spectrum is continuous, but it can be represented by the following seven milestones along the way.

1. Strong theist. 100 per cent probability of God. In the words of C. G. Jung, 'I do not believe, I *know*.'
2. Very high probability but short of 100 per cent. *De facto* theist. 'I cannot know for certain, but I strongly believe in God and live my life on the assumption that he is there.'
3. Higher than 50 per cent but not very high. Technically agnostic but leaning towards theism. 'I am very uncertain, but I am inclined to believe in God.'
4. Exactly 50 per cent. Completely impartial agnostic. 'God's existence and non-existence are exactly equiprobable.'
5. Lower than 50 per cent but not very low. Technically agnostic but leaning towards atheism. 'I don't know whether God exists but I'm inclined to be sceptical.'
6. Very low probability, but short of zero. *De facto* atheist. 'I cannot know for certain but I think God is very improbable, and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there.'
7. Strong atheist. 'I know there is no God, with the same conviction as Jung "knows" there is one.'

I'd be surprised to meet many people in category 7, but I include it for symmetry with category 1, which is well populated. It is in the nature of faith that one is capable, like Jung, of holding a belief without adequate reason to do so (Jung also believed that particular books on his shelf spontaneously exploded with a loud bang). Atheists do not have faith; and reason alone could not propel one to total conviction that anything definitely does not exist. Hence category 7 is in practice rather emptier than its opposite number, category 1, which has many devoted inhabitants. I count myself in category 6, but leaning towards 7 – I am agnostic only to the extent that I am agnostic about fairies at the bottom of the garden.

The spectrum of probabilities works well for TAP (temporary agnosticism in practice). It is superficially tempting to place PAP (permanent agnosticism in principle) in the middle of the spectrum, with a 50 per cent probability of God's existence, but this is not correct. PAP agnostics aver that we cannot say anything, one way or the other, on the question of whether or not God exists. The question, for PAP agnostics, is in principle unanswerable, and they should strictly refuse to place themselves anywhere on the spectrum of probabilities. The fact that I cannot know whether your red is the same as my green doesn't make the probability 50 per cent. The proposition on offer is too meaningless to be dignified with a probability. Nevertheless, it is a common error, which we shall meet again, to leap from the premise that the question of God's existence is in principle unanswerable to the conclusion that his existence and his non-existence are equiprobable.

Another way to express that error is in terms of the burden of proof, and in this form it is pleasingly demonstrated by Bertrand Russell's parable of the celestial teapot.³¹

Many orthodox people speak as though it were the business of sceptics to disprove received dogmas rather than of dogmatists to prove them. This is, of

course, a mistake. If I were to suggest that between the Earth and Mars there is a china teapot revolving about the sun in an elliptical orbit, nobody would be able to disprove my assertion provided I were careful to add that the teapot is too small to be revealed even by our most powerful telescopes. But if I were to go on to say that, since my assertion cannot be disproved, it is intolerable presumption on the part of human reason to doubt it, I should rightly be thought to be talking nonsense. If, however, the existence of such a teapot were affirmed in ancient books, taught as the sacred truth every Sunday, and instilled into the minds of children at school, hesitation to believe in its existence would become a mark of eccentricity and entitle the doubter to the attentions of the psychiatrist in an enlightened age or of the Inquisitor in an earlier time.

We would not waste time saying so because nobody, so far as I know, worships teapots;* but, if pressed, we would not hesitate to declare our strong belief that there is positively no orbiting teapot. Yet strictly we should all be *teapot agnostics*: we cannot prove, for sure, that there is no celestial teapot. In practice, we move away from teapot agnosticism towards *a-teapotism*.

A friend, who was brought up a Jew and still observes the sabbath and other Jewish customs out of loyalty to his heritage, describes himself as a 'tooth fairy agnostic'. He regards God as no more probable than the tooth fairy. You can't disprove either hypothesis, and both are equally improbable. He is an a-theist to exactly the same large extent that he is an a-fairyist. And agnostic about both, to the same small extent.

* Perhaps I spoke too soon. The *Independent on Sunday* of 5 June 2005 carried the following item: 'Malaysian officials say religious sect which built sacred teapot the size of a house has flouted planning regulations.' See also BBC News at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4692039.stm>.

Russell's teapot, of course, stands for an infinite number of things whose existence is conceivable and cannot be disproved. That great American lawyer Clarence Darrow said, 'I don't believe in God as I don't believe in Mother Goose.' The journalist Andrew Mueller is of the opinion that pledging yourself to any particular religion 'is no more or less weird than choosing to believe that the world is rhombus-shaped, and borne through the cosmos in the pincers of two enormous green lobsters called Esmerelda and Keith.'³² A philosophical favourite is the invisible, intangible, inaudible unicorn, disproof of which is attempted yearly by the children at Camp Quest.* A popular deity on the Internet at present – and as undisprovable as Yahweh or any other – is the Flying Spaghetti Monster, who, many claim, has touched them with his noodly appendage.³³ I am delighted to see that the *Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* has now been published as a book,³⁴ to great acclaim. I haven't read it myself, but who needs to read a gospel when you just *know* it's true? By the way, it had to happen – a Great Schism has already occurred, resulting in the *Reformed Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*.³⁵

The point of all these way-out examples is that they are undisprovable, yet nobody thinks the hypothesis of their existence is on an even footing with the hypothesis of their non-existence. Russell's point is that the burden of proof rests with the believers, not the non-believers. Mine is the related point that the odds in favour of the teapot (spaghetti monster / Esmerelda and Keith / unicorn etc.) are not equal to the odds against.

* Camp Quest takes the American institution of the summer camp in an entirely admirable direction. Unlike other summer camps that follow a religious or scouting ethos, Camp Quest, founded by Edwin and Helen Kagin in Kentucky, is run by secular humanists, and the children are encouraged to think sceptically for themselves while having a very good time with all the usual outdoor activities (www.camp-quest.org). Other Camp Quests with a similar ethos have now sprung up in Tennessee, Minnesota, Michigan, Ohio and Canada.

The fact that orbiting teapots and tooth fairies are undisprovable is not felt, by any reasonable person, to be the kind of fact that settles any interesting argument. None of us feels an obligation to disprove any of the millions of far-fetched things that a fertile or facetious imagination might dream up. I have found it an amusing strategy, when asked whether I am an atheist, to point out that the questioner is also an atheist when considering Zeus, Apollo, Amon Ra, Mithras, Baal, Thor, Wotan, the Golden Calf and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. I just go one god further.

All of us feel entitled to express extreme scepticism to the point of outright disbelief – except that in the case of unicorns, tooth fairies and the gods of Greece, Rome, Egypt and the Vikings, there is (nowadays) no need to bother. In the case of the Abrahamic God, however, there is a need to bother, because a substantial proportion of the people with whom we share the planet do believe strongly in his existence. Russell's teapot demonstrates that the ubiquity of belief in God, as compared with belief in celestial teapots, does not shift the burden of proof in logic, although it may seem to shift it as a matter of practical politics. That you cannot prove God's non-existence is accepted and trivial, if only in the sense that we can never absolutely prove the non-existence of anything. What matters is not whether God is disprovable (he isn't) but whether his existence is *probable*. That is another matter. Some undisprovable things are sensibly judged far less probable than other undisprovable things. There is no reason to regard God as immune from consideration along the spectrum of probabilities. And there is certainly no reason to suppose that, just because God can be neither proved nor disproved, his probability of existence is 50 per cent. On the contrary, as we shall see.

NOMA

Just as Thomas Huxley bent over backwards to pay lip service to completely impartial agnosticism, right in the middle of my