

# The Universality Of Morality

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As with any inquiry, we must challenge our own presuppositions. Sapience is largely about learning how to learn. Indeed, even more important than what you know is what you know to ask. This requires being able to extricate oneself from one's own dogmatic tendencies; and be willing to buck received wisdom whenever the occasion warrants.

## An Abiding Occidental Conceit

Let's begin by recalling a sage observation made by Ernst Cassirer in "The Philosophy Of The Enlightenment": "The true object of history is the story of the mind, not the tale of facts which are forever being distorted." To take heed of this, a survey of moral progress vis a vis religion is in order. However, any account of the life of the mind must not be done through a religious lens. For a dogmatic system cannot be audited via a dogmatic system, lest we find ourselves in a catch-22. {38}

In assaying the world's myriad ethical systems, and seeing how they have undergone a metamorphosis over the course of history, it is best to disabuse ourselves of any biases that may sabotage our better judgement. So our point of departure will be an evaluation of the (reputed) supremacy of "Western Civilization". Seeing how this paradigm holds up to critical scrutiny will inform how we approach our survey. (Spoiler alert: It collapses upon even cursory inspection.)

To undertake such an audit, it is necessary to proceed from the axiom that universal and timeless moral principles exist. For otherwise we find ourselves devolving into relativism, whereby no consistent standard can be used to perform ANY evaluation. {1}

There are several implications to this approach. First and foremost: The weal of the human race must be assumed to be not only the *sine qua non*, but the ultimate grounding of legitimacy. Doing so mandates that we are all working from a "common ground", which is the only way any discourse can proceed from divergent perspectives. Put another way: Human solidarity is not merely a *summum bonum*; it is a foundation for all worthwhile discussion.

But is such solidarity illusory, or is it grounded in something practicable? And what, exactly, does it entail?

As fellow humans, we are dealing with the same intuitive faculties. Those faculties equip us all with an innate moral intuition (an inborn moral compass, if you will). This is simply to say that all *homo sapiens* enjoy roughly the same cognitive capacities—namely: the capacity to infer what is categorically (as opposed to just accidentally) universal. As a result, every person has access to said principles. This felicitous exigency is necessary for the present thesis to have purchase in practical, everyday situations.

Such (categorical) universality is integral to debunking the conceit of "Western" (alt. "Judeo-Christian") values as preeminent in some way; thereby defusing what is best described as the *de rigueur* fetishization of the so-called "West". For, as it turns out, Occident-fetishism is predicated on a heedlessness of (objective) morality; as well as an ignorance of geography and of (actual) history.

Of course, part of being ignorant is being ignorant of one's ignorance; so we do not tend to notice our own senescence. (Such is the nature of "false consciousness".) Blind spots don't announce themselves; and illusions are illusions precisely because they don't SEEM TO BE illusions to those who are beguiled by them.

This collective pathology—as ubiquitous as it is potent—operates according to the trope that the "West" (conceived as some exalted monument of human culture) is somehow superior to the cultures of the rest of the world. This conceit is maintained by holding that said superiority exists either according to alleged divine Providence (which favors the Occident for reasons that must be posited independently of the creed-in-question) or simply due to the Occident having allegedly propounded the most estimable values (due to sheer accident of history). To attribute this disparity to religious affiliation is to beg the question, as we must then suppose that certain people were favored in the revelation-targeting lottery.

As we shall see, to tout a chimerical "West" is—effectively, if not conscientiously—to use a term of imperialism, and thus of hubris. This is simply to recognize that this spurious categorization is more a fanciful conceit than it is a credible model of geo-political realities...for ANY point in history.

Edward Said rightfully denounced this binary taxonomy (what he called "Orientalism"), which he defined as the exaltation of the Occident via a (tacitly demeaning, if not outright divisive) alterity; which entails the derogation (either implicit or explicit) of the Orient qua OTHER. While Said's indictment captured much of what is discussed in the present essay, it was epistemologically flawed. His mistake was to resort to cultural relativism as the primary means of justifying what was an otherwise valid indictment. (Everyone's different; so who's to say what's better and what's worse?) Said could have made his case simply by appealing to universal moral principles; and—I contend—done so on much more solid ground.

Said's point, of course, was for Euro-centric thinkers to extricate themselves from their Occident-centric worldview, whereby anything outside of the exalted "Western" orbit was seen primarily as "other", and thus inferior (specifically with respect to the putative superiority of Judeo-Christianity). As Jeanne Morefield put it, Said propounded "a humanism capable of escaping Euro-centrism's yawning maw." Yet he ultimately was left with appeals to basic decency rather than having recourse to a solid foundation that *everyone* could reference.

As we'll see, the "Orientalist" paradigm of "West" (whatever that means) vs. "East" (whatever that means) is predicated on a false dichotomy; as it erroneously ascribes—either approvingly or disapprovingly, depending on one's vantage—what are UNIVERSAL principles primarily (or, in its most extreme form, EXCLUSIVELY) to what is blithely referred to as Western "civilization". Whatever that's supposed to be is anyone's guess.

This skewed way of framing human affairs does so under the assumption that such principles are INHERENTLY Occidental; as if Occidental societies somehow had these consecrated precepts in their DNA (presumably, by dint of being Judeo-Christian or "European" or Anglo-Saxon or simply from the "West"). It's as if Providence somehow favored the denizens of certain regions. This is, of course, hogwash. (If there is a god, we might consider that he doesn't pick favorites BY GROUP; people are the one's who do that. They are obliged to then retroactively ascribe that assessment to their deity in a transparently self-serving "post hoc ergo proctor hoc" maneuver.)

In recognizing this binary (Occident-Orient) taxonomy to be specious, we find that one can be guilty of bigotry going EITHER WAY. Thus those who EITHER lionize OR demonize "the West" indulge in the same self-ingratiating fiction. For in both cases, what is operative is the misapprehension that the "right

answers” are entirely attributable to, well, THEIR OWN culture. (Conceit, it turns out, is a potential problem for everyone, as it works for any conceivable perspective.)

That both Occidental Reactionaries (in their daft attempt to exalt “the West”) and Oriental Reactionaries (in their daft attempt to deride “the West”) employ this correlation is quite telling. For it is perfidious in either form. Even worse: Both kinds of ideologue make a habit of associating such (categorically) universal principles EXCLUSIVELY with Judeo-Christian tenets—be it “democracy” or human rights or the scientific method. The former do so in order to rationalize the promotion of those tenets; the latter use it as an excuse to dismiss the notion of universal principles altogether. Thus BOTH camps make the mistake of supposing that science and liberalism are inherently OCCIDENTAL. {33}

In reality, such precepts are categorically secular: as eminently human on a South Pacific Island as in Omaha, Nebraska.

And so it goes that even those hostile to civil society are inclined to characterize its hallmark tenets as somehow inherently Occidental—a position in which they find no irony. Consequently, those who (rightfully) impugn “the West” for imperialism are inclined to (wrongly) accuse anyone promoting Enlightenment principles (democracy, human rights, the scientific method) as somehow IMPOSING “Western” culture on other cultures. For example, in present-day Russia, Putin simply posits Eastern Orthodox Christianity in contradistinction to its Roman Catholic and Protestant counterparts; scoffing at things like “democracy” as Western pabulum. Meanwhile, Xi Jin-ping associates human rights with “the West”; and thus as a bunch of florid nonsense. Dar al-Islam derides the separation of church and state as a vapid “Western” invention; and considers the mere notion of civil liberties a zany construct indicative of Dar al-Kufr.

In sum: Such conceit is central to the tribal Exceptionalism endemic to ANY and ALL cultic activity—regardless of perspective. For, in any given case, BOTH stances rest on the supposition that such principles are inherently Occidental...and, by implication, have BUILT IN the denigration of “Oriental” (non-Western) societies. It’s as if championing those principles somehow insinuated that one is emulating “the West” PER SE. But this supposition is erroneous. That the Enlightenment happened to occur in Scotland, Germany, and France (followed by England and the U.S.) is a historical accident; not the result of some grand cosmic scheme. The time and place of Enlightenment was never written in the stars.

Granted, societies in certain geographical locations happened to realize the credence of liberal democracy *before* societies in other geographical locations did; yet that fact says nothing about the BASIS FOR that credence (see my “The History of Legal Codes”). Nor should this be taken as a sign of some Providential decree. Re-run history after tweaking a few (precipitous) contingencies, and the Persians or the Mongols might have spearheaded the Enlightenment...rather than a few white men in Europe. Ashoka the Great, a pioneer of the concept “human rights”, was not “Western”. Nor was “Cyrus the Great” before him (also a pioneer of human rights). Nor was “Kanishka the Great” after him (also a pioneer of human rights).

To suppose that human rights are inherently “Western” misses the point of “human” (which is, by definition, all mankind) and “rights” (as inalienable as they are based on principles that are CATEGORICALLY universal). Neither Ashoka NOR Cyrus NOR Kanishka were seeking to emulate the Greco-Romans. Yet under such leaders, headway was made. The Persians pioneered civil society based on ZOROASTRIAN principles. Then the Mauryans and the Kushans pioneered civil society based on BUDDHIST principles. In such instances, the Abrahamic deity was nowhere to be found.

So what are we to make of the Occident-fetishist? The “West” prevailed, you say? The temptation to make such a supposition comes largely from a grievous misunderstanding of history. The fact that certain things

happened to occur at certain times and places does not preclude us from noticing that, over the course of human history, there has been a clear trend: Salutary developments have invariably been concomitant with instances of secularization.

Moving from Ashoka's "dhamma" [alt. "dharma"] (*in Classical Antiquity*) to Spinoza's "Ethics" (*in the Renaissance*) to Kant's "Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals" (*in the Enlightenment*) to Mill's "On Liberty" (*in the pre-Industrial era*) to Rawls' "Theory Of Justice" (*in the post-Industrial era*), we find that—each and every step of the way—the most sagacious insights have NEVER been predicated on dogmatic thinking of any kind (let alone depended upon the existence of INSTITUTIONALIZED dogmatism). And in no case was tribalistic thinking salient. When Thomas Paine penned "Common Sense", arguably the major catalyst for the American Revolution, he was adamant about the cause NOT being predicated on religionism of any kind. (See my essay on "America's Founding Myth".)

Even though liberal democracy was first established in "the West", "the West" does not OWN the principles of civil society...let alone morality itself. As will be made apparent from the historical evidence explored forthwith, West / East is a fatuous social construct. That people at a particular place / time happened to converge upon certain timeless principles before people in other places is a quirk of circumstance, not a mark of destiny.

Put another way: "arete" does not know an Occident-Orient divide.

The Enlightenment was a long, sloggish, highly-idiosyncratic process by which certain elements within the Occident managed to go against the grain. It was a marginally-flawed process in which a few bold figures managed to extricate themselves from the dogmatic quagmire that was the Dark Ages...and buck the status quo. That protracted intellectual privation (from the stuttering demise of the pre-Christian Roman Empire through the Early Italian Renaissance) was the result—both directly and indirectly—of rampant religionism. It was institutionalized dogmatism (a.k.a. religion) that accounted for a thousand years of intellectual blight, a condition the Occident endured for a millennium.

Religion didn't jump-start the Enlightenment in the 17th century; it impeded it UNTIL the 17th century; at which point a few heterodox thinkers finally broke free from the dogmatic tethers that had been addling Europe since the 4th century. It was not sycophancy that explains this, it was audacity.

EVEN THEN, the Enlightenment was imperfect—an observation for which we can thank the Frankfurt School; as well as the ORIGINAL field of "critical theory", which sought to bring us back down to earth. The urged Occident-fetishists to disabuse themselves of hyper-romanticized impressions of their progenitors' achievements—which was addled by the blight of corporate power, the grave dysfunctions of free-market fundamentalism, and the depravations of hyper-consumerism. {37}

To expose the faultiness of this widely-embraced Occident-Orient dichotomy, it helps to look at it historically. In the over-simplified telling, the Occident was a venue for the intermixture of two ancient societies: Greek and Roman, which—after an infusion of the Judeo-Christian creed—gave rise to the medieval Europe...then to the Renaissance...then to the Enlightenment...then to modernity. (And there was a smattering of Andalusian Muslim, Slavic, and Persian influences as well.) But it was NOT the consecrated dogmatic system of the Abrahamic tradition, nor the precedents of ancient empires, that "Westerners" can thank for the progress that has been made since their emergence from the Dark Ages.

Being as it has always been obdurately Reactionary (and vehemently anti-intellectual), the Roman Catholic Church was the epitome of the counter-Enlightenment. So when the Florentine author, Dante Alighieri penned a treatise promoting the separation of church and state in the 14th century, "De Monarchia", the

Vatican banned it. When Dennis Diderot produced the “Encyclopédie” in the 18th century, the Vatican condemned it as sacrilegious, and had its author imprisoned. Anyone who had procured a copy of the this compendium of secular knowledge was instructed to immediately hand it over to the local clerics for destruction. And in the 19th century, when Darwin told us about biological evolution and Marx decried systems of domination / oppression / exploitation...the response of religious authorities was entirely predictable.

Such occurrences were not anomalies. The programmatic suppression of intellectual activity in Europe by the Roman Catholic Church began in Late Antiquity—most notably: with the condemnation of the scholar, Origen in the 3rd century. That was followed by the execution of the famed pedagogue, Hypatia of Alexandria in 415 (during the sacking of the Library of Alexandria). And THAT would be followed by the execution of Boëthius in 524.

The greatest intellectual—and pedagogue—of the 12th century, Peter Abelard, was a heterodox thinker who was persecuted for heresy. Soon thereafter were the condemnations of 1277. Then...

- The excommunication of William of Ockham in 1328
- The chastisement—and posthumous excommunication—of John Wycliffe in 1382
- The execution of Jan Hus in 1415
- The reign of terror by Grand Inquisitor, Tomas of Torquemada in the 1480’s and 90’s
- The banishment of renown scientist, Michael Servetus (which led to him being burned at the stake in Geneva at the behest of John Calvin) in 1553
- The burning of Giordano Bruno in 1600
- The persecution of Galileo Galilee in 1633

...all the way to the incarceration of Denis Diderot in 1749...not to mention strident denouncements of luminaries like David Hume in England and Voltaire in France. {35}

Yet Enlightenment thinking persisted in the face of formidable resistance. Immanuel Kant proved in his “Groundwork For The Metaphysic Of Morals” that objective morality has a solid basis, which involved something other than the gilded dogmatic foundations with which denizens of Christendom become so smitten. He showed that all morality resides within each of us qua autonomous actors, as it is ultimately grounded in (our innate capacity to engage in) REASON. The Categorical Imperative no more depends on sacred doctrine than it depends on astrology charts or crystal balls. {1}

Tropes about some exalted “Western civilization” are also GEOGRAPHICALLY non-sensical. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all began in the SAME REGION of the world: the Levant and Mesopotamia (i.e. not the Occident). Pace Roman / Byzantine (and briefly, Frankish) claims upon Palestine, that coveted piece of real estate was never considered an integral part of “the West” until 1948. (See my essay on “The Land Of Purple”.) Another thing to bear in mind: Judaic lore—and the Hebrew Bible itself—came from BABYLON, not Jerusalem (see my essay on the “City Of The Beloved”).

In order for those of us of “the West” to disabuse ourselves of self-ingratiating illusions, certain myths need to be debunked. For example, the institution of higher learning was not pioneered in the Occident. More than SIXTEEN CENTURIES before Bologna (Europe’s first full-fledged university), there was the Vedic university at Taxsha-shila (Taxila). Leaving aside the famed Greek schools (the Ionian academy at Miletus, Plato’s lyceum in Athens, and Phaedo’s academy at Elis), there were notable universities around the world during Classical Antiquity:

- The imperial Chinese (Qin) academy at Yin-qui, as well as the Han academies at Chang’an.

- The Sammatiya “migadaya” at Isipatana (Sarnath), which was Buddhist / Hindu.
- The Museion at Pergamon, which was pagan.
- The Museion—replete with the famed library—at Alexandria, which was pagan.

This last venue was eventually razed by fanatical Christian mobs c. 415 A.D. Many of the irreplaceable manuscripts were burned; and all the teachers were slaughtered (including the renowned pedagogue, Hypatia).

During Late Antiquity, several universities were established. Here are a dozen of the most notable:

- The Athenaeum at Rome (*pagan*)
- The Kushan schools at Gandhara and Mathura [Bactria] (*Buddhist*)
- The “Didascalium” (catechetical school) at Alexandria (*Coptic Christian*)
- The Assyrian school of Antioch (*Syriac Christian*)
- The Persian school at Isfahan (*Zoroastrian*)
- The Assyrian schools at Edessa and Nisibis (*Syriac Christian*)
- The Persian “daneshgah” [medical academy] at Gundishapur (*Zoroastrian*)
- The school at Apamea (*Neo-Platonist*)
- The Vedic “maha-vihara” at Nalanda in Bihar (*Hindu*)
- And the Byzantine Pandakterion at Constantinople was founded as a *secular* school of medicine, philosophy, and law c. 425.

Meanwhile, a scourge of mind-deadening credenda was epitomized by the Catholic Church, which became the Roman Empire’s mandatory Faith pursuant to the Edict of Thessalonika c. 380. When the fanatical bishop, Theophilus had the great Library at Alexandria pillaged c. 391, and when the Reactionary prelate, Cyril of Alexandria encouraged Christian mobs to pillage it again c. 415, we can be reminded that Roman Catholicism has, from its earliest days, been no friend of knowledge.

Also before Bologna were the “maha-viharas” at:

- Vallabhi in Gujarat
- Uddanda-pur[a] and Vikram-shila in Bihar
- Telhara in Maharashtra
- Kuruk-shetra in Haryana
- Pushpa-giri in Odisha / Orissa
- Isipatana [Sarnath] in Varanasi
- Jagaddala [Varendra] and Pahar-pur[a] in Bengal

*All those were Hindu.*

Also notable was the Preslav literary school in Bulgaria, which was secular. And when the university at Bologna was built c. 1088, it was founded as a nominally secular institution; and was even managed by the student body. (The famed medical school at Salerno was yet another secular institution of higher learning established prior to Oxford.)

So then what? Oxford was founded at the end of the 11th century as a (nominally) SECULAR institution; though it did not rise to significance until the 13th century, in tandem with Cambridge. (For a list of universities founding during this time, see Appendix 2 of my essay, “Islam’s Pyrite Age”.)

Since Catholicism was the only game in town, anything that happened within its dominion invariably happened with the permission of—and thus under the aegis of—the Church. This should not be misconstrued

as evidence for religious instigation. Vatican imprimaturs (i.e. Papal bulls) were not the same as commissions; they were de jure for ANY institution within the Holy Roman Empire.

That only Catholics built bridges in medieval Europe is not an indication that civil engineering was predicated on the catechism. Even when beholding with awe Europe's grandest cathedrals, are we to thank a strict adherence to Pauline theology for the knowledge and skill required for their masterful construction? By the same token, we would have to thank Thoth for the breathtaking architectural feats at Giza.

Grandiloquent shibboleths about "The West" become especially risible when any and all estimable advances on the planet are attributed—either directly or indirectly—to Judaism and/or Christianity. As I hope to show, the supposition that Progressive ideals (civil liberties, liberal democracy, etc.) should be attributed to Abrahamic religion—in any way—is bonkers. It's like claiming that people become vegetarian due to a preponderance of game-hunting. (After all, some hunters eat berries.) { 14 } The closest that Abrahamic tradition ever came to such ideals was their tentative embrace of the Golden Rule...which was marginal at best (Hillel the Elder notwithstanding); as will be discussed below.

Leaving aside the fact that neither Judaism nor Christianity had ANYTHING to do with Athenian democracy—or with ANY ancient philosophy for that matter—, we might inquire: What in heaven's name is in the Bible that has to do with civil society in the modern sense? As we will see, the ineluctable answer is: Absolutely nothing. { 15 }

In spite of all that history has demonstrated, we are expected to believe that "The West" would NOT have espoused human rights and democratic government (or had a solid basis for espousing such ideals) BUT FOR the tenets of Judaism / Christianity. Such a contention is downright absurd. It amounts to an attempt to attribute critical thinking to blinkered thinking—as if a *departure from* received wisdom could be ascribed a *more ardent embrace of* received wisdom. By entertaining this proposal, one is enjoined to conjecture—against all common sense—that emerging from a dogmatic quagmire could somehow be explained by further immersing oneself within it. (Are we to suppose that one can be edified by becoming more obstinately dogmatic?)

To reiterate: It is an accident of history that significant parts of "the West" seem to have adopted what are CATEGORICALLY UNIVERSAL principles. For anyone else to embrace said principles is not a matter of emulating "the West"; it's simply a matter of converging on the same principles that some (iconoclasts) happened to recognize at a different place and time. As I make clear in my survey of "The Long History Of Legal Codes", the Occident no more "owns" the precepts of civil society than it owns the laws of physics.

Those who hyper-romanticize "Western culture" might want to remind themselves that it is the WEST that gave us fascism, (anti-Marxian) "Marxism", free-market fundamentalism, hyper-consumerism, post-modernism, and political correct-ness (dysfunctions with which "the West" is still contending). { 43 }

Meanwhile, it was the Far East that first gave us animal rights and HUMAN rights...as well as paper and movable-type...and the contemplative practices that are now largely vindicated by modern neuroscience.

The worn-out trope that "Western civilization" (itself a nebulous category) was built on Judeo-Christian "values" (whatever that might be for any given proponent) is so obviously false, it is bewildering that anyone who knows anything about world history still says it with a straight face. One can only inquire: "To which 'civilization' and 'values' are you referring, exactly, when you mouth these nostrums?" Proscribing murder, fraud, and theft, you say? Are we to suppose that the Sumerians were keen on LYING to each other? (More on that later.)

As it just so happened, the Occident attempted to build society around Judeo-Christian tenets for well over a thousand years (from the 4th century to the 18th century), with horrific results—replete with *rampant* murder, deception, and theft. Indeed, such things were THE HALLMARK FEATURES of the Dark Ages. The irony of this being the case in the midst of paeans to Mosaic law are lost on those who harbor illusions about the vaunted Judeo-Christian legacy.

It was only when society began extricating itself from the morass of dogmatic thinking (read: Abrahamic religionism) that civil society finally—at long last—began to prevail. This is obvious to anyone who knows the first thing about “Western” history. Civil society, it turns out, is about as Abrahamic as chemistry is thaumaturgic. To thank something that had been holding us back from the progress that has been made is to confuse “in spite of” with “because of”.

So what of the farcical epistemology on which Occident fetishism is based?

There is a towering hubris to the claim that Abrahamic theology is the only basis for an objective morality. Take, for instance, a Hindu / Jain / Buddhist who mentions that he KNOWS FULL WELL that lying, stealing, cheating, and killing are wrong. Imagine responding: “Perhaps; but the only way you—or anyone, for that matter—can possibly know that is because of the existence Mosaic law.” Such a claim is not only false; it is obnoxious.

For the suggestion is: BUT FOR the decalogue being given to Moses on Mount Horeb (a.k.a. “Sinai”) in the 13th century B.C., mankind would have no objective basis for such statements. This contention is of the form: “If not for [insert mythic event here], nobody would be able to, or be aware of, [insert important thing here].” As we’ll see, EVERYONE ON THE PLANET was well-aware of such things; which is why those SAME strictures crop up in virtually every society—from Jainism, through Pythagoras, to Buddhism...and, yes, in Mosaic law.

The universality of such elementary precepts will be adumbrated below. {5}

Is one to say a Hmong who exhibits a remarkable degree of probity that he only has the Judeo-Christian tradition to thank for his laudable character? Shall we insist that the Hmong has no ultimate basis for his estimable conduct BUT FOR Judeo-Christian dogmas? Merely posing such questions reveals how ridiculous such thinking is.

It is, then, a grave mistake to associate universal principles (human rights, as well as the ideals of civil society) with “the West”...as if such things were inherently Occidental. This common misattribution not only gives denizens of the Occident too much credit; it doesn’t give denizens of the Orient ENOUGH credit. (As mentioned, Ashoka the Great alone serves as a blinding counter-factual to this gross mischaracterization of human civilization.) Meanwhile, when it comes to matters of racial equality or the iniquity of slavery or the problems with misogyny, Abrahamic lore is worse than useless. Not only is it not the ultimate basis for (objective) morality, it is egregiously deficient on virtually all counts.

But the hyper-romanticized characterization of the Occident is erroneous ANYWAY. The notion that “Western civilization” (spec. in its modern incarnation) is primarily based on a Judeo-Christian foundation is the exact opposite of the case. Presumably by “Western”, we have in mind the quasi-democratic society we tend to find throughout much of the Occident (in the post-Enlightenment era). Shall we square that with Deuteronomy 17:14, which prescribes a king to rule over the land? Or should we simply disregard anything in scripture that doesn’t fit the desired narrative?

As I explicate in “The Long History Of Legal Codes”, the so-called “West”—to the extent that it has



approached the ideals of civil society—has become civil insofar as it has managed to DIVORCE ITSELF FROM its Judeo-Christian roots. This progression has involved not so much an explicit repudiation of Abrahamic dogmas as it has been a matter of RISING ABOVE them. Such was the case even with Deists like John Locke (a racist, by the way) and Charles-Louis de Secondat of Aquitaine (a.k.a. “Montesquieu”), both of whom recognized the importance of secular government when they promoted individual rights (for white men). Needless to say, Montesquieu’s “Spirit Of The Laws” was NOT the spirit of the Abrahamic deity. It was concerned with a secular spirit, not with a holy spirit.

And for the lack of religiosity involved in the founding of the United States, see my essay: “America’s National Origin Myth”, where it is made clear that Judeo-Christian tenets were NOT to thank for the forging of the Constitutional Republic in the New World.

So what are we to make of the genealogy of the Occidental conceit (spec. since the fall of the Roman Empire)? Starting with Charlemagne, Occident-centrism came to be more than just a self-ingratiating farce; it became an ethos. Subsequently, the “West” (i.e. the divinely-ordained Franks vis a vis brown-skinned heathens) became some fuzzy ideation—like the ethereal haze of an intoxicating fever-dream. (“WE are sophisticated; THEY are savages. So WE are more worthy...and thus have the right to do whatever the heck we want!”) As I’ll show later, the Mongols are a strident refutation of the myth that everything we now value has “the West” to thank.

So why does the myth abide? Exaltation of “the West” is, if nothing else, a way of rationalizing a pathological (collective) sense of entitlement. “Western civilization is superior BY NATURE” is a tremendously gratifying thing to say for anyone who claims an estimable legacy of, well, “Western civilization”...however arbitrarily defined it might be. (Such is the nature of popular tropes: They are custom-tailored to serve a certain purpose; and they are effective regardless of how groundless they might be.)

For Occidental peoples (especially the denizens of Christendom), this specious—yet extremely alluring—trope was put into overdrive by Oswald Spengler over a century ago. However, in naming this resplendent realm, he opted instead for the moniker “*abendländes*” [lands of the evening]; going so far as to eschew the term, “Europeans” (due to its interminably fluctuating geo-political parameters). Tellingly, Spengler rejected the notion that there was continuity between Greco-Roman culture and Christendom / capitalism: the fatuous *Plato-to-NATO* narrative declaimed by those who don’t understand world history.

As a politically-useful ideation, “the West” did not gain currency until the late 19th century; and even then was of dubious provenance (in addition to the fact that it was borderline incoherent). After all: What, exactly, was it supposed to refer to? A hyper-romanticized conception of “Christendom”? A region of gilded Greco-Roman heritage? Some vaunted (Teutonic) European stock? Of an exalted Judeo-Christian legacy? (Notably, such ad hoc reverence requires disregarding the egregious depredations of Roman Catholic dominion during the course of the Middle Ages.) The ideation became especially useful during the Cold War, where it served America’s (and the Catholic Church’s) propagandistic purposes splendidly.

Yet, even then, the conceptual incoherence persisted. Is “the West” supposed to include the Greek pantheon of deities? Norse mythology? Germanic / Prussian paganism? Ostrogoths? Visigoths? Celts? The odious legacy of colonialism (in the Americas, in Africa, in the Middle East, in Southeast Asia)?

Is it supposed to include the trans-Atlantic slave trade? Fascism? The colossal iniquities of investment banks? War profiteering? The domination of multi-national corporations? The scourge of natural resource extraction?

No? Well, then, by what standard shall we parse all of this? If we are at liberty to be selective (highlighting only whatever is salubrious while discounting anything deleterious), we could play this game with—well—virtually any society in history. In extolling (purportedly) Occidental virtues, delineations invariably become an ad hoc mishmash of cherry-picked features.

For the Occident-fetishist, the question forever remains: What is this fabled “West” about which you so vociferously chortle? How is the “capitalism” vs. “socialism” dichotomy supposed to play a role in this custom-tailored caricature? Where did, say, iconoclastic figures like Baruch-cum-Benedict Spinoza and Thomas Paine fit in? Does it include the variegated ambit of Marxian ideals? Organized labor? Feminism? {33}

The delineation problem occurs with geography as well. Does the “West” include the Levant? How about the Slavic lands? If so, then “Eastern Orthodox” Christianity as well as the “Eastern” Syriac Church must be considered part of the so-called “West”. If not, then how are we to think of the Assyrian / Syriac and Melkite Christians? What about the Druze? Kabbala? Wicca?

Behold the “West” in all its glory. Yet contradictions arise. Ideologically, does this lofty moniker refer to the financiers of Wall Street or to the labor movement? A monolith cannot claim both...yet, historically, it MUST. Either way, one’s answer poses a slew of fatal problems for what this loaded term (the “West”) is supposed to sanctify. Can something be a paean to both rent-seekers and an exploited working class? No. Hence: We are forced to pick and choose as it suits our purposes. And that upends the whole enterprise.

Of course, the demarcations of this nebulous thing we often call “the West” were always unclear (if not convoluted); the definition always vague...if not utterly confused. But, then again, the point was never really about logical coherence; it was about basking in an ethos.

“The West”, then, is a social construct; nothing more. As imperious and enticing as this fanciful ideation might be, it turns out to be constituted of a rather ramshackle dogmatic edifice: a flashy facade with ever-shifting foundations. The beguiling caricature is as illusory as it is seductive. Most successful illusions are, after all, quite alluring.

So, in exploring the credence of universal principles, how shall we proceed? While culture is constituted of much more than moral tenets, I will focus presently on ethical systems, some of which cut across cultural lines.

To reiterate: In order for me to make my case cogently, it is crucial to understand that (universal) moral principles TRANSCEND culture; so are not a byproduct of circumstance. (Contrary to the zany tenets of post-modernism, not EVERYTHING is merely a psychical / social construct.) Most notably, moral principles are not inventions of this or that group; they are immutable features of the cosmos; of which we are all denizens. They are there waiting to be elucidated. As Thomas Paine put it: “Man cannot make principles; he can only discover them.”

In my essay, “The Progressive Case For Cultural Appropriation”, I show how almost everything in so-called “Western” culture was co-opted from cultures that would not be categorized as pristinely “Western”. In fact, there has been so much cultural cross-pollination, it is intractable to propose some discrete—let alone monolithic— “Western culture”.

And so it has come to pass: Popular memes have been transferred across cultural lines since time immemorial...which makes the positing of an OCCIDENT (or even an Orient) a self-ingratiating farce; not a description of Reality.

Alas. It is not uncommon for people of a given culture / religion to impute towering significance to their own sacred doctrines (spec. scriptures). This is a significance that does not actually exist. It is made crystal clear when considered from a global perspective; which is precisely what we are about to do here.

“For everything that’s good in the world, we can thank [insert tribal demarcation here].” Proponents are inclined to make this false—yet always self-serving—attribution; as it pertains to the positive role that their own heritage has (purportedly) played over the course of world history. Such flattering whimsy is largely the result of a strategically-engineered illusion...which is often required for sustaining the delusive thinking that impels any ethno-centric view of the world. It is on this delusive self-conception that virtually all cult activity depends (be it Nazism or Stalinism or Maoism or Juche...or, indeed, any one of the theocratic versions of the Abrahamic creed—from Revisionist Zionism to Christian Dominionism).

The irony, then, is that BOTH Occident-Supremacists (as with American Dominionists and Revisionist Zionists) AND non-Occident-Supremacists (as with Russian nationalists under Putin, Iranian nationalists under the Ayatollahs, Wahhabi nationalists under the House of Saud, and Chinese nationalists under Xi Jinping) engage in this false dichotomy as a way of exalting themselves while diminishing everyone else. Those afflicted with delusions of Exceptionalism (especially those who are simple-minded) are tempted to structure their perception of the world according to this binary taxonomy: us (good) vs. them (bad). The Manichean worldview has tremendous appeal; for it is as simple-minded as it is gratifying.

As it happens, universal moral principles are as exclusively Occidental as is aesthetic appreciation...or basic human decency...or a good sense of humor. That is: not at all.

Those with an imperialistic mentality are especially prone to such divisive thinking. It is up to cosmopolitans / humanists around the world to rebuke this bewitching mindset. In his “Letters On The Advancement Of Humanity” (18th century), the Prussian philosopher, Johann Gottfried Herder admonished against the tribal chauvinism that undergirded imperialism: “There is no such thing as a specially-favored nation on Earth... There cannot, therefore, be any order of rank.” He concluded: “The culture of man is not the culture of the European; it manifests itself according to place and time in every people.” As we’ll see, this laudable frame of mind presaged what Marx would later call “species-being”.

Having debunked the illusory Occident-vs-Orient worldview, we are ready to elucidate the universality of morality. But first, let’s turn to the checkered record of the Judeo-Christian domain.

## **A Dubious Abrahamic Legacy:**

Try persuading a Hindu or Jain or Buddhist that the only way to truly recognize the dignity / value of each and every human being is by recourse to Abrahamic (i.e. Biblical) sources. The mere suggestion is preposterous; and will surely elicit a bewilderment.

We can be quite certain that Siddhartha Gautama did not have Mosaic law in mind when he preached benevolence; and that Ashoka the Great had not read the Bible when he promulgated a system of human rights. Alas, one is forced to countenance both absurdity and hubris in order to make the claim that Abrahamic dogmas are the only feasible basis for an objective morality.

It is risible that the more ardent proponents of Abrahamic religion are so determined to take credit for ethical precepts that they routinely flout (e.g. judge not let you be judged, don’t be greedy, eschew materialism, love thy neighbor, be forbearing, etc.) Claiming that one’s creed is the basis for certain ideals while simultaneously usurping those very ideals is a boondoggle that should be so easily dismissed.

As should be plain to see, the vast majority of Christianity has almost nothing to do with anything Jesus of Nazareth actually preached. It is no secret that the creed's most vociferous practitioners routinely pass judgement, epitomize avarice, relish conspicuous consumption, are eager to persecute, and are the LAST to forgive. (The happy exceptions, like Quakers and Unitarians, prove the rule.) Voltaire put it well when he noted: "Of all religions, the Christian should of course inspire the most tolerance, but until now Christians have been the most intolerant of all men." Thomas Paine concurred, noting that "It is from the Bible that man has learned cruelty, rapine, and murder; for the belief of a cruel God makes a cruel man." {21}

There are other problems. Pretending to harbor grievances about something while simultaneously PROMOTING it would be laughable if it were not so perfidious. It is a rather perverse irony that the (demonized) Egyptians of the Pharaonic epoch—who serve as the primary villain throughout the Torah—did NOT practice slavery; even as Mosaic law PRESCRIBES slavery. This should prompt us to ask: Which ethical system was more immoral?

So what of the obligatory exaltation Abrahamic lore? Per most religious apologists, we are obliged to attribute any moral principle to a tribalistic, authoritarian system that demands a censorious approach to thought / expression, mandates dogmatism, and engenders revanchist attitudes. That theme scheme is so Reactionary would seem to be a red flag for most level-headed people. Yet many are duped into giving such a strikingly obtuse, puritanical mindset plaudits for being (what they are convinced is) the SOLUTION TO so many problems.

When it comes to its slew of odious proclamations, the Torah often ends up contradicting itself. Take genocidal mania, for example. Weren't all humans "created in the image of god"? Yet, then again, didn't the Creator of the Universe decide to pick favorites amongst the homo sapiens scattered across this third planet from Sol? {31}

This issue prompted Thomas Paine to state: "Whence arose all the horrid assassinations of whole nations of men, women, and infants, with which the Bible is filled; and the bloody persecutions, and tortures unto death and religious wars, that since that time have laid Europe in blood and ashes; whence arose they, but from this impious thing called revealed religion, and this monstrous belief that God has spoken to man?"

In Jeremiah 11:11, the Abrahamic deity pronounces: "I will bring on them a disaster they cannot escape. Although they cry out to me, I will not listen to them." What sort of super-being is this? Clearly, one that is pathologically vindictive.

With tales of Elijah letting children be eaten by bears and Joshua stopping the sun mid-day (so that he would have time to complete his genocide), it is clear that *good will* was not paramount in the proposed cosmogony.

We might inquire further: Were the MIDIANITES of the Hijaz or the AMALEKITES of Edom "created in the image of god" when Yahweh instructed the Israelites to slaughter all of them? What of the Moabites...or any of the other peoples against whom god adjured annihilation? Pogroms along ethnic lines, you say? If we're all god's children, how does this make sense?

And what about the denizens of the Indus Valley or of the Yellow River Valley? Did the Indians and Chinese matter? What about the Celt-Iberians, Siberians, Polynesians, and Native Americans? Were they less relevant to the grand cosmic plan? Or is it more likely that the senescent authors of the Torah were simply unaware that such peoples even existed? {23} The obliviousness of primitive minds seems to be a more likely explanation than "god works in mysterious ways".

Well, hold on. Let's be charitable. Perhaps those genocides were isolated incidents, attributable to extenuating circumstances. Alas, no. Ethnic cleansing seems to have been standard operating procedure for the duration of the Bronze Age. Behold First Samuel 6:10, where—we are notified—50,000 were slaughtered. For what egregious transgression was this atrocity perpetrated? For peeking into the ark of the covenant. In First Samuel 15:3, followers are commanded to slaughter ALL Amalikites, including women and children (and, for good measure, all their livestock).

The Abrahamic deity's wrath even extended to children (Second Kings 2:23-24) and to infants (Exodus 12:29 and Psalm 137:9). Especially cringe-worthy is Deuteronomy 20:10-15: "When god hands the city over to you, kill every man in that city with your swords. But take the women, the children, the cattle, and everything else of value as plunder for yourselves. You may possess and use these spoils of war that the god gives you from your enemies." Sounds like the rantings of a primitive tribal panjandrum rather than the wise council of a benevolent super-being.

We see here where the Sunnah got its precedent. As I show in my essay on the Syriac source-material for its scripture, Islam lifted much of its creed from antecedent Abrahamic lore; and—as outlined in my series on the history of Salafism—when it came to carrying on the tradition of genocidal mania, it put the precedent into overdrive.

Alas, collective punishment along ethnic lines was standard throughout the Torah—as with Genesis 34:25-29. Numbers 31 is perhaps the most heinous. In verses 13-18, Moses orders his followers to execute all the Midianite boys and non-virgin females...which entailed the slaughter of many tens of thousands. Wherefore? To take revenge for a bad dalliance between an Israelite man and a Midianite girl. But take heart: During the mass execution, 32,000 virgin females were spared...and subsequently enslaved.

(What else do we encounter in Numbers? Behold verses 1-3 and 27-35 in chapter 21; as well as verse 35 in chapter 16.)

And what of culpability-by-association? As it happens, collective punishment was not limited to those who were contemporaneous. Exodus 34:7, Deuteronomy 5:9, and Numbers 14:18 demand that, should one transgress, descendants shall ALSO be punished. Sons and grandsons aren't enough; they shall be punished for the next FOUR GENERATIONS. (!) This goes beyond pathological vindictiveness; it is sheer malice. (Think this was an aberration. Nope. It is reiterated in the Book of Isaiah (65:6-7) AND in the Book of Jeremiah (32:18), as well as in Psalms 79 and 109.

Exodus 23:31-33 is a recipe for Judeo-Supremacy: "You shall drive [non-Hebrews] out before you. You shall not make a treaty with them and their gods. They shall not be allowed to live in your land." This is actually harsher than even the Koran, which makes allowances for fellow "People of the Book" ("dhimmi") remaining in the land...so long as they submit (that is: don't get out of line and pay the protection tax).

The genocidal passages go on and on. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:23-25...and through Exodus 32:27, where Moses slaughtered 3,000 of his fellow Hebrews for not toeing the line. For other examples of sanctioned genocide in the Torah, see Deuteronomy 3:3-7, 7:12, and 20:16. {22}

The Judaic apologist may be inclined to respond: "Well, the Torah may extol genocide. But hey! At least it tells us not to bathe a calf in its mother's milk!" In fact, virtually all of the hundreds of "mitzvot" enumerated (in the 3rd century A.D., the Palestinian rabbi Simlai counted 613 in all) are utterly inane, if not asinine. We already mentioned the (half-assed) proscriptions against greed, lying, stealing, cheating, and killing. Fine. But here's the thing: None of the OTHER commandments—in EITHER of the versions

presented in the Torah—have anything to do with ethics. Rather, they have to do with procedural matters (read: FORMALITIES). After all, a “mitzvah” was originally conceived as a RELIGIOUS obligation, not an ethical obligation. In other words: This was a matter of PIETY, not of probity. {24}

This enumeration of “mitzvot” has had virtually no role to play in the development of (estimable) ethical systems—nor any role to play in the development of civil society; seeing as how it was purportedly codified two and a half millennia ago. (This fact is made plain in my survey: “The Long History of Legal Codes”.) Voltaire was correct when he observed that “as long as people believe in absurdities, they will continue to commit atrocities.” {13}

To what extent and in what ways does Mosaic law capitalize on all that is best in humanity? How, exactly, does the Halakha, or the Roman Catholic catechism, or the Sunnah invoke the better angels of our nature? These are legitimate questions to pose. Be that as it may, to insist that [insert holy book here] is the final word on all important matters is to implicitly—if not explicitly—repudiate all the things that mankind has learned ever since (in science as well as in political theory).

For when fetishizing a holy book, one is obliged to suppose that the point at which it was composed was the point at which mankind’s understanding of the universe reached its pinnacle—that is: knowledge stopped evolving in any significant way.

Pursuant to this putative historiographical apogee, there was no more room for (fundamental) improvement. After all, THAT was the resplendent acme of all insight. The implication of this self-ingratiating farce is simple: We now have nothing left to do but refer back to what the designated tract says. It’s all in there...somewhere...even if you need to engage in some exegetical acrobatics to get what you’re looking for.

The obduracy of this worldview is on full display in the Hebrew Bible. The Creator of the Universe decided to make a compact with one particular tribe in Bronze Age Canaan...well, ACCORDING TO THAT TRIBE. Funny how that worked out. Such brazen conceit reminds us of the universal penchant to proclaim: “God is exclusively on OUR side”...which, it turns out, is something anyone can say at any point to justify, well, ANYTHING.

Though entirely specious, this captivating narrative holds tremendous appeal. More to the point: Such a proposition would surely have seemed plausible to those of a pre-modern age (in which dogmatism and tribalism ran rampant). For everyone likes to believe that the auspicious events of THEIR OWN epoch represent the high water-mark of human actualization. They can then proceed with the unwavering conviction that, come what may, the god(s) are on THEIR side. (With the imprimatur of the godhead, anything goes.) Thus a tenet is seen as inviolable if it is issued from “on high”. (After all, who are we mere mortals to question the wisdom of an omniscient super-being; or challenge what has been divinely ordained?) And who is “god”? Well, it’s whoever one makes him / her to be. As Voltaire noted: “God is a circle whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere.”

In his snide remark about freethinkers’ indiscriminate will to believe, G.K. Chesterton had it exactly backwards. In the event that one is over-eager to stand for SOMETHING, one will fall for just about anything. More to the point: If one is prone to deifying a figurehead (be it a person or supernatural entity), then one will be willing to believe whatever happens to hit the right buttons—no matter how outlandish (or, as Scott Atran noted, ESPECIALLY if it is outlandish). For when a person is heavily inclined toward cultic thinking, and he is earnestly seeking to satiate certain needs, *all bets are off*. Such a person is likely to be drawn to some form of cult activity. WHICH cult it ends up being is largely a matter of accident (esp. accident of birth); as it will likely be whatever presents itself most readily (or, if there are several

viable options, whatever most resonates; pace ambient social pressures).

Cultic thinking is fungible precisely due to the versatility of this psychical mechanism. That's why the penchant for religiosity is transferable between creeds: disenchanted Catholics become Evangelicals, disaffected Evangelicals become Scientologists, etc. (It's not for nothing that wayward gang-members routinely convert to Islam while in prison.) Once cult activity PER SE is on the table, the possibilities are almost endless.

Meanwhile, someone who has managed to find a sense of purpose / belonging by his own devices will NOT be disposed to cult activity; especially when one has cultivated a healthy self-esteem. Far from prostituting his mind to the first charismatic leader to mesmerize him, he is forced to be more judicious in what he opts to lend credence. Having procured for himself a firm existential orientation—WITHOUT having resorted to dogmatism or tribalism—he is more apt to engage in critical reflection / deliberation. Such lucidity / perspicacity enables someone to secure all the purported virtues of religionism (morality, spirituality, community, existential ballast) without having to countenance any of its drawbacks. Insisting that dogmatism and/or tribalism is required to have an ethical framework, access to the divine, social support, or something to “live for” is like insisting that one must be well-versed in alchemy to be a chemist.

Make no mistake: The appeal of cult activity is profound. For it is a straight-forward way to (seem to) give one's life meaning. And it confers the satisfaction of being part of something important (thereby: offering a sense of direction for those who may otherwise feel lost at sea; conferring the much-needed sensation of MATTERING on those who might otherwise feel alienated; providing structure to those who may otherwise be rudderless). Religionism is a balm for disaffection and anomie.

We join clubs to belong (that is: to be part of something, to feel accepted by others). We engage in idolatry (that is: worship celestial beings or worldly demagogues) because we revel in enchantment (especially when it is SHARED enchantment). So in the event that one is prone to idolatry and/or dogmatism and/or tribalism, as soon as one finds something that “fits the bill”, one will be willing to believe, well, ANYTHING.

And contrary to G.K. Chesterton's quip that non-believers are prone to believing anything, not even the most jaded of nihilists could actually believe in NOTHING; lest they not survive beyond this weekend. (The alternative to religionism isn't nihilism; it's finding the need to figure things out without resorting to dogmatism.)

Question: What sort of person is open to believe just about anything? Certainly not a well-adjusted person who thinks for himself. Well-honed critical thinking skills (spec. in the context of Kantian autonomy) is a virtual guarantee that one will NOT succumb to institutionalized dogmatism (that is: will not be religious). As the consummate freethinker, Thomas Paine put it well when he averred, “My mind is my own church.” And as Kant made clear: To be autonomous is not a gateway to nihilism; it's a gateway to MATURITY. (Nietzsche would have concurred.) Rectitude is inimical to heteronomy. Probity knows no groupthink, and certainly no obeisance. Heteronomy is no basis for morality; as any idiot can follow orders. Only when one's morality is predicated on genuine autonomy do principles really matter.

To recapitulate: Positing a monumental historical interlude (a figure, an event, a holy book) with one's progenitors (their leaders, deeds, and tenets) as the stars of the show, often entails seeing mankind's procurement of wisdom as a fait accompli. The implication is that, thereafter, all we have left to do is re-apply what has already been given to us.

Here's the catch. In order to maintain this illusion, people today are forced to suppose that any (apparent)

improvements that have occurred in the intervening time must be attributed to that singular milestone. (Here, “milestone” is an apt metaphor, as the creed is typically rigid and, well, set in stone.) Consequently, any insights that have been gleaned EVER SINCE that pivotal juncture must be seen in light of, well, *that particular interlude* in human history—be it a man receiving divine revelation on a mountaintop or a demagogue making a decree from his ivory tower.

Take, for example, the fetishization of the Mosaic decalogue (a.k.a. the “ten commandments”) in the Abrahamic tradition. The Hebrews’ covenant with the Abrahamic deity had two primary versions: Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:4-21. (Take your pick.) {5} We might start by noting that there is no indication that either David OR Solomon (the two kings of the united “Kingdom of Israel”) had any knowledge of a Mosaic decalogue. There is not a single reference to the fabled “ten commandments” in anything they said or did. (!) After all, David had no qualms with coveting the married woman, Bathsheba—a clear contravention of the covenant with his god that he surely would have at least CONSIDERED. {9}

The best that can be said about Mosaic law is that some of it pointed out what was already obvious to any sane person at any point in history: that we should not cheat, steal, lie, or kill (without permission). Yet even on those elementary points, the decalogue does not quite get it right. For it does not prohibit all forms of cheating (deception); it does not prohibit theft across the board (defrauding ANYONE, extorting ANYONE); and—in its earnest abjuration of genocide—it certainly does not prohibit ALL instances of murder. (Hence: Don’t commit unsanctioned homicide; but feel free to stone women for extramarital sex.)

So what, then? The divinely-forged compact admonished people not to covet others’ property (including others’ wives); and often limited other admonishments to fellow Hebrews. Indeed, Judaic proscriptions like those against lying and killing—and usury, for that matter—seem not to have applied to those outside the tribe; as they pertained exclusively to fellow Hebrews. {11} How can we be so sure “neighbors” was so circumscribed? Fixation on bloodlines was a major part of this dubious precedent. Tellingly, even the descendants of “mamzers” (those of impure / foreign blood) were prohibited by this law-code from taking part in the “congregation of Yahweh” UP TO THE TENTH GENERATION (as specified in the opening verses of Deuteronomy chapter 23).

Hence we are given a strictly delimited version of “love thy neighbor”. Certain entitlements were limited to the chosen people: Beth Israel.

Moreover: The prohibition against lying was presented only in terms of bearing false witness; and so did not extend to an obligation to keep promises with—nor to abstain from hoodwinking—those outside of the tribe. (The stricture seems to have been limited to testimonials; whereby piety was to be upheld. Other forms of deception were, apparently, still fair game.) Hence: TESTIMONY should be honest. Meanwhile, slavery was all well and good.

And so we find that even on the most basic of moral precepts, the Abrahamic creed fell far short; and fell far short from the get-go. {10} The notion that civil society owes the honoring of Mosaic law for its most prized virtues—and would not have an objective basis for morality BUT FOR Judaism / Christianity—is nothing short of preposterous. Yet this does not prevent the most delusive of Judaic / Christian apologists from making such brazen claims.

Judaism began with sacralized human sacrifices. This execrable “Yah-weh-ist” practice is attested throughout the Hebrew Bible. Here are two dozen notable passages:

- Exodus (13:12-16, 16:20, 20:26, 22:28-30, 23:37, and 34:19)



- Deuteronomy (12:30-31 and 18:10)
- Judges (11:29-40)
- Second Kings (3:27, 16:3, 17:[1]7, 21:6, and 23:10)
- Second Chronicles (28:3 and 33:6)
- Jeremiah (7:31, 19:4-5, and 32:35)
- Isaiah (30:27-33 and 57:5-7)
- Ezekiel (16:20-21 and 20:26-37)
- Psalm (106:35-38)

It is from that tradition that Judaism was born. (Note the reversion to the practice by kings Ahaz and Manasseh of Judah. Sometimes the practice was rebuffed by god; much of the time it was demanded. Either way, it was clearly an issue in need of being addressed amongst the target audience.)

The “Akedah” (the test of Abraham) was not about god’s (circumscribed) willingness to permit someone to transplant a human sacrifice with that of a ram; it was about one’s willingness to sacrifice a fellow human—even one’s own child—to appease the godhead. Doing good deeds to demonstrate one’s fealty? No. The Abrahamic deity wanted FLESH. (Call this the “burned meat over benevolence” precedent.) Eventually, human sacrifice was eschewed (Micah 6:7) and even proscribed (Leviticus 18:21 and 20:2-5; Deuteronomy 12:30-31 and 18:10). There seems to have been an effort to erase the fact that the Abrahamic deity once demanded such a opprobrious deed. In Jeremiah 19:4-5, god not only rebukes the practice; he insists he never condoned it. (After all, how could the ultimate source of moral authority have possibly ever endorsed reprobate behavior?) The problem is that antecedent scripture remained fully in tact; and on the record for everyone to see.

As it turns out, nothing in Abrahamic scripture comes remotely close to articulating the most basic principles of civil society (e.g. human rights). Therefore the supposition that civil society is PREDICATED ON Abrahamic scripture is completely without merit. To anyone who makes such an outlandish contention, the only response is: “Don’t be ridiculous.”

Alas. It is routine for the most ardent religionists to ascribe far, far, far more significance to their own sacred texts than is warranted; and thus to take credit for everything good that’s ever happened...whilst passing the buck when it comes to responsibility for anything bad.

So what are we to make of the commandment to not covet the property of, bear false witness against, or kill one’s fellow Hebrew? Is this something to be impressed by?

No. Societies around the world had been hewing to such mores long before—and long after—the Exilic Period; and NONE of it had anything to do with tablets carried down from Mount Horeb. Yet the way Judeo-Christian apologists crow about the Mosaic legacy, all of Western Civilization—and even DEMOCRACY ITSELF—is predicated on Judeo-Christian tenets; even if unwittingly.

The implication here is that mankind has the Abrahamic (religious) tradition to thank for all its accomplishments....including the insights of the Enlightenment. (!) This is, of course, not only patently absurd; it is—in many ways—the exact opposite of the case.

And what of freedom of expression (of conscience, of speech, of the press) and of dissent? THAT certainly did not derive from Judeo-Christian tenets. Leviticus 24:16 mandates the death-penalty for anyone who blasphemes. The same goes for the New Testament. Saul’s letter to the Romans explicitly prohibits dissent from authority (13:1-2). (No kidding. He proclaims that it is our duty to obey those in power, whoever they might be. Gadzooks!) {36}

Even a cursory survey of world history (and of the PRESENT geo-political landscape) reveals—with blinding clarity—that authoritarian / puritanical mindset is synonymous with fundamentalist religion, irrespective of the creed. Hence: When the English Bill of Rights was drafted in 1689, and when the American Bill of Rights exactly one century later, the measures had NOTHING to do with religious doctrine.

This bear worth repeating: Authoritarian / puritanical sensibilities have always been concomitant with cult activity—be it Orthodox Judaism or Pentecostalism or Salafism or Juche or Scientology or anything else.

It is no secret that the Roman Catholic Church was always adamantly against the separation of church and state. The MILLENNIUM of European society's stagnation is largely attributable to the fact that, throughout the era of the Holy Roman Empire, church and state were inextricably intertwined. So it comes as little surprise that when the Florentine author, Dante Alighieri penned a treatise promoting the separation of church and state in 1312, "De Monarchia", the Vatican immediately banned it.

This position was, of course, in spite of Mark 12:17, Matthew 22:21, and Luke 20:25; in which Jesus of Nazareth (hereafter: JoN) exhorted his followers to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto god that which is for god. It's easy to skip that part when one is hellbent on instituting theocracy.

The fact that the Gospels enjoined *the separation of church and state* was laudable. It is worth noting three other estimable teachings ascribed to JoN:

- *"turn the other cheek"* (reject the temptation to be vengeful; be peaceable)
- *"judge not lest ye be judged"* (be tolerant of those with whom you disagree; be open-minded)
- *"love thy neighbor"* (extend the scope of empathy to THE OTHER; be kind to the stranger)

Thus NON-theocracy, forbearance, humility, and compassion. Such ideals are is illustrated in such parables as the Good Samaritan and the challenge to chastisers quick to condemn others to cast the first stone.

JoN also espoused *communal ownership* (i.e. socialism)—as attested in Luke 3:11 when he states: "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and whoever has food is to do likewise." (If one didn't know any better, one might be left with the impression that JoN was some sort of Progressive. Imagine.)

Materialism / hyper-consumerism (esp. conspicuous consumption) is a flagrant betrayal of JoN's message. But no matter. Vengeance, hubris, AND cupidity—along with obsession and delusion—are all hallmarks of the most zealous Christians in history.

The Roman Catholic Church went so far as to turn ALL FIVE of the above (estimable) teachings completely on their head. JoN's admonishments against hoarding wealth were completely ignored by the Vatican, which—in due course—became a repository of monomaniacal ambition and unbounded decadence; not to mention a hive of unbridled avarice.

At every point, and in every way, the Catholic Church rebuked prognostications that "the meek shall inherit the Earth"; opting instead for power. Before long, the Vatican had become one of the most corrupt institutions on the planet; and perhaps the most unscrupulous organization in human history. (Times haven't changed.)

Since Theodosius christened the Roman Empire a totalitarian theocracy at Thessalonica in February of 380,

a prerequisite for being a Roman Catholic was—effectively—to ignore just about everything worthwhile JoN is purported to have taught.

And what of Islam? What role has the Sunnah played in the annals of human events?

In order to answer this question, there is a query that level-headed Muslims might wish to pose to themselves. Pick any (genuine) pearl of wisdom acquired since birth, and ask: “Did I need the Sunnah for that? Could I have gleaned it independently of my Faith?” If Islam’s holy book is, indeed, a valid source of wisdom, then there should be clear responses to these questions (respectively: “yes” and “no”).

Alas, one digs oneself into quite a deep hole should one answer in this way. For, in doing so, one is essentially admitting that one is both intellectually and morally bankrupt. (This seems to be a harsh indictment until we take any fundamental moral insight, and hear one say, “Gosh-golly! BUT FOR having read the Koran, I would not have realized that.” Such a person is either deluded or a sociopath.)

For those with dignity, the (honest) responses to the above two questions can only possibly be, respectively: “of course not” and “of course”. In that case, one implicitly admits that the Koran is—AT BEST—a grievously imperfect moral prosthetic for, well, those who are in desperate need of said prosthetic.

The fact of the matter is that when a Progressive Muslim condemns any of the morally repugnant things that are routinely done in the name of Islam, it is not his Muslim-ness that enables him—let alone impels him—to do so; it is his basic humanity. And one’s humanity exists independently of any given dogmatic system. More to the point: Probity is not realized by reading any specific book; as moral sense cannot be gleaned from an instruction manual. (Following directions is a sign of obeisance, not of rectitude.) To morally evaluate a source, one must have recourse to standards that exist independently of the source-in-question.

The issue here is one of appropriate attribution. If a religious person exhibits probity, shall we suppose that it is somehow due to an unwavering adherence to sacred doctrine? Would the person be iniquitous BUT FOR having sworn himself to this or that code? Such questions answer themselves.

For example, regarding punishment for apostasy, Progressive Muslims are forced to unequivocally and categorically disavow 2:217, 4:89, 5:54, 9:11-12/66/73-74, and 88:21 (though they may not admit—to others or to themselves—that this is, in fact, what they are doing). Their rejection—be it implicit or explicit—belies the professed (divine) nature of the book in which these passages are contained. It should be noted that this is not a matter of rejecting some allegedly “distorted” INTERPRETATION OF these verses; it is the rejection of the verses themselves. There is no other way to repudiate what they clearly mean. (The trick, of course, is not to read between the lines; it’s to read the lines themselves.)

It is only through the bowdlerization of sacred texts (selective disavowal of passages based on standards that cannot THEMSELVES derive from the text in question) that most religious traditions can be reconciled with an effort to foster civil society. Engaging in exegetical shenanigans, whereby chimerical subtext is posited so as to tweak the meaning as it suits one’s purposes, is disingenuous. The need to resort to such hermeneutic chicanery in order to get a text to mean what one WISHES it meant would not exist had the text been composed in a cogent manner. (This brings to mind a quip by Voltaire: “The truths of religion are never so well understood as by those who have lost the power of reason.”) Such exegetical shenanigans (known as “eisegesis”) is simply a form of legerdemain: clandestinely importing the desired meaning into the text, then pretending it inhered in the text all along.

To reiterate: Rather than reading “between the lines”, honest expositors simply read the lines themselves.

It is only via a judicious parsing of scripture that Progressive X (where X is ANY religion) is possible. No exegetical shenanigans required.

It seems that no matter how diligently we try to twist and contort our interpretive lens into a funhouse mirror, we simply cannot make a text mean what it obviously does not really mean; or make it seem more erudite than it really is.

Like any other holy book in history, the Koran played no role AT ALL in the development of civil society. To illustrate this point, simply contrast the writings of, say, Thomas Paine with the Koran's contents (or, for that matter, the contents of the Torah). The juxtaposition is jaw-dropping—both in erudition and in eloquence.

Of course, Paine is only one possible point of contrast. If we read Bacon, Spinoza, Locke, Leibniz, Hume, Voltaire, Rousseau, Michel de Montaigne, the Marquis de Condorcet, Kant, Wollstonecraft, Mill, Dewey—or, for that matter, the likes of John Rawls, Peter Singer, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Ronald Dworkin, or Amartya Sen—and then read ANY Abrahamic scripture, we will encounter the extremes of human discourse. (Making this contrast requires that one actually read the above works—a task that few have bothered to do.)

To pretend that the Torah or Koran is the best articulation of moral principles...EVER...is just plain silly. When one reads the Torah or Koran, one should realize something that is glaringly obvious: It is not that mankind can do better; it is that mankind HAS done better. Much, much, much better. If the "Recitations" is an accurate transcription of the Creator of the Universe, then the Creator of the Universe has much to learn from any one of the aforementioned thinkers. (Unlike most other holy books, doctrinal Muslims actually believe that the Koran is a VERBATIM TRANSCRIPT of the Abrahamic deity's final message to all mankind.)

As for the claim that the Koran (or the Torah, for that matter) is THE best possible explication of human rights, another comparison may be in order. Contrast the contents of the 1948 U.N. Declaration of Human Rights with the contents of Islam's holy book. Not fair, you say? Recall that the Koran, according to the Koran, is supposed to be a perfectly worded, TIMELESS piece of exposition. That is: It is impossible to articulate any of its points any better; and its messages are adequate FOR EVERYONE, FOR ALL TIME. The book not only invites such comparisons; it demands them.

So what is it, exactly, that we are supposed to learn from Biblical proclamations? That the Creator of the Universe prefers offerings of singed meat over fresh vegetables (as Cain learned)? That if a man finds his betrothed not to be virginal, he shall stone her to death at her father's doorstep? That trial by ordeal is a prudent way to see if a woman accused of adultery is guilty? {17} That disobedient children should be KILLED? That homosexuality is an abomination? That genocide is a prudent way to remedy perceived iniquity? {18} Are we to suppose that it was mixing meat with dairy that was preventing mankind from realizing its full potential? (That last query sounds zany. Yet according to Exodus 23:19, the answer is a resounding YES.)

With its "an eye for an eye" protocol, the Torah promotes a retributive conception of "justice" (the justice of tribal honor; and thus tribe-based animus) rather than restorative justice (the distributive justice of civil society). Two wrongs don't make a right. The response to those who demonstrate the worst of what humans can do is to show them the best of humanity; so what are we to make of passages like Exodus 21:24 and Koran 5:45? That the punishment should be proportional to the crime? Nope; that's clearly not what it says. The line is clearly an enjoinder for retribution.

Alas, the most profound moral lesson proffered by Mosaic law is that deception, betrayal, covetousness, and murder are off-limits—a notification that is not exactly earth-shattering news for anyone who is sane. For the world’s Judeo-Christian apologists to take credit for such elementary strictures is rather daffy. As we’ll see below, such prohibitions are STANDARD in ethical codes around the world.

Are we to consider the ultimate source of moral guidance to be a book in which the deity has a bear maul children (Second Kings 2:23-24) and has a mob stone a man to death for the crime of gathering kindling on Saturday so that he may feed his family (Numbers 15:32-36)? If one isn’t afflicted with psychopathy, the answer is obvious.

We know that things like fraud and theft are unethical simply from the Golden Rule: a maxim that—as we’ll see—predates Occidental mores. The mistake, of course, is to suppose that the only way to establish an objective basis for morality is to espouse Divine Command Theory (discussed forthwith).

Even the didactic heft proffered by the Talmudic tradition—insofar as it proffered laudable discursive approaches to important matters—was predicated not on the credence of Mosaic law, but on the capacity for people to engage in critical deliberation; and on a precedent of intellectual curiosity that in no way depended on the Halakha...or on ANY sacred doctrine for that matter. Talmudic discourse was a tradition of conducting worthwhile discussion IN SPITE OF the miasma of titillating dogmas in which participants immersed themselves. They operated with alacrity IN SPITE OF, not because of, their religiosity.

So we might ask: When we are instructed to stone to death brides found not to be virgins on their wedding night (Deuteronomy 22:13-21), are we to take that as seriously as the demand to stone to death those gathering sticks on the Sabbath (Numbers 15:32-36)? How about when First Samuel 18:25 recommends the ruler be given a hundred goyim foreskins as tribute?

Upon surveying the contents of the Torah (nay, the entire Mikra), we quickly find we are dealing with the ramblings of authors addled by Iron Age thinking. The Hebrew Bible is a treasure trove of moral insights in the same way that Ptolemy’s “Almagest” furnishes us with the finer points of theoretical cosmology. It is no exaggeration to say that the average Harlequin Romance novel is a better source of spiritual guidance.

Is it prudent to allow ourselves to be held hostage by such arcane material? Responsible thinkers are obliged to bring their moral intuitions to bear on whatever sacred texts happen to tantalize their fancy. (This is just as much true when it comes to the New Testament...which, it turns out, also promotes both slavery and misogyny.)

For an indication of how intellectually benighted the earliest Abrahamic culture was, we might note the glaring paucity of scientific and technological achievements. During the Second Temple / Mishnaic periods, the grand total of scientific and technological contributions of Beth Israel was ZERO. {7} The explanation for this is simple: The earliest Jews sought explanations solely in myth (that is: not in by analyzing efficient causes or inquiry into the natural world). They were steeped in dogmatism; and critical thinking was anathema. Tellingly, in 1677, when a Jewish thinker finally got around to articulating the principle of sufficient reason, it required him LEAVING Judaism. As is well known, Spinoza was banished from Beth Israel for his unsolicited (secular) insights.

Such deficiency becomes especially obvious when we contrast (pre-Talmudic) Beth Israel to, say, the Chinese, Hindus / Buddhists, Persians, and Greeks of the same period—all of whom made profound advances; none of whom were acquainted with the Abrahamic deity.

And so it went: In between animal sacrifices and playing nine kinnor, those partaking in the Mosaic Law in

the pre-Talmudic era accomplished nothing outside the production of the Mikra...along with perhaps the beginnings of the Mishnaic tradition. {3} Looking to the Exilic Period in particular (when Judaic lore was first codified), try as one might, one cannot find the Judaic equivalent of a Pythagoras (who was teaching at around that time). If a cosmic super-being had truly “chosen” this small band of Middle Eastern monotheists, he certainly did not choose them to understand much about the natural world.

In spite of all this, Judeo-Christian AND Muslim apologists persist in making the following (cockamamie) claim: BUT FOR this Abrahamic creed, there would be no OBJECTIVE basis for ethical guidelines in everyday life. This impoverished view of morality is based—in large part—on ignorance (of history, of their own creed, and of moral philosophy). In the more invidious cases, this claim is based on a wanton obfuscation of the intellectual blight that has been virtually synonymous with Judeo-Christian and Islamic dominion throughout history. Only a moral dunce says: “If it were not for these edicts, we would have no objective basis for morality!”

At best, a holy book is a prosthetic for morality (just as it serves as a prosthetic for spirituality). But to concede that the lore of this or that religion is a didactic tool is to concede that it is really nothing more than a compelling narrative vehicle—like any other useful parable. Hence there is an obvious answer to the question: If not for THIS instruction manual, how could we have a solid foundation for ascertaining what is right and wrong?

It is indubitable that objective moral standards are available to Freethinkers. In fact, instruction manuals only ever GET IN THE WAY of apprehending such standards. With this in mind, it makes perfect sense that Jews, Christians, and Muslims practiced slavery. After all, the concept of human rights was inimical to the worldview of the authors of their respective scriptures. It is to this heinous practice—and conditions for the emergence of civil rights—that we now turn.

## **Slavery:**

When it comes to the history of one group of people enslaving—or otherwise programmatically dominating / oppressing / exploiting—another group of people, we find that a pattern emerges. (Note: Here we are referring primarily to chattel slavery; but in this survey, it is worth including other forms of systematic persecution.) As it turns out, such iniquity tends to be perpetrated wherever cult activity is strongest—most notably: medieval regimes like Roman Catholic and Salafi. (Modern regimes like Nazi, Stalinist, and Maoist were concerned more with ethnic cleansing and other pogroms rather than with enslavement.) {25}

It is worth noting that this heinous practice has NOT been universal. For over THREE AND A HALF MILLENNIA (from the 20th century B.C. to their eradication by Spanish Conquistadors in the 16th century), the Mayans—and their antecedents—had no slavery. Their massive temple complexes were erected from voluntary labor; and there was little, if any, highly-concentrated wealth. That is: It was a relatively egalitarian society.

Nor was there chattel slavery in Pharaonic Egypt. Nor in Ancient Persia (though there was indentured servitude). Nor in the Kushan Empire. Nor in the Mongol Empire. And while there was a socially inequitable caste system, most of the Indian Empires (from the Magadha and Nanda Empires, through the Maurya and Gupta Empires, to the Maitraka and Chalukya Empires) did not have chattel slavery.

Barring genocide, chattel slavery represents what is probably the most egregious breach of Kant’s Categorical Imperative (discussed forthwith). And barring genocide, it is arguably the most flagrant betrayal of Marx’s “species-being” (also discussed forthwith). As it turns out, the biggest culprits have

been those practicing fundamentalist versions of the three major Abrahamic traditions.

The willingness to enslave other people was sanctioned by the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the Torah, most notable are Exodus 21:20-21 and Leviticus 25:44-46, which actually ENCOURAGE the enslavement of those from other tribes (who are described as property). We are also told that beating slaves is fine, so long as the owner doesn't beat them to death. As mentioned earlier, in chapter 31 of Numbers 31, Moses enjoins the taking of other tribes' virgin girls as sex-slaves...while instructing married women to be killed. (For endorsements of slavery, also note verses 2-11 and 27-27 in Exodus chapter 21; as well as verses 10-15 in Deuteronomy chapter 20.)

Fellow Hebrews could also be enslaved. However, they were to be offered special dispensation—a caveat stipulated in Deuteronomy 15:12-13 and Leviticus 25:39-40. Thus: Don't treat your own tribe with quite as much cruelty...in the event that you enslave THEM. {22}

In sum: Enslaving humans is fine, as long as you don't do any work on Saturday.

When the Torah's protagonist (Yahweh) notifies us that the most important thing we need to know about taking female slaves is that we should shave their heads before bedding them, we can be quite certain that the authors of the pentateuch (five books of Moses) were morally challenged. What the book most certainly does NOT do is proffer a compelling case for abolition.

Such moral bankruptcy continued into the New Testament. A clear endorsement of chattel slavery can be found in the Gospel of Matthew (18:25 and 24:51) and of Luke (12:47). Also notable are Saul's letter to the Ephesians (6:5-9), to the Colossians (3:22 and 4:1), and his first letter to Timothy (6:1-3); as well as Peter's first letter (2:18-20). That's not all. In his letter to the Galatians, Saul wrote: "The slave might continue to serve his master; male and female shall each retain its proper role in the on-going stream of life." (Strange how Saul was not quoted in the civil rights movement.)

If the Creator of the Universe, in all his infinite wisdom, really believed in equal rights for all mankind, one would think that he would have mentioned something—even just once, in passing—about this issue in one of his holy books. Alas. His mind was more occupied with such pressing matters as witch-craft, mixing meat with dairy, doing domestic chores on the Sabbath, and the intolerable occurrence of women speaking up in church (as expressed in Saul's first letter to the Corinthians 14:34-35).

Hence the Vatican's endorsement of the practice in the "Decretum of Gratiani" [Decretal of the jurist, Gratian], which was codified in the "Concordia Discordantium Canonum": part of the Corpus Juris Canonici of the 12th century. Tellingly, the Vatican only had qualms with people (spec. with Genoese and Venetians) selling men, women, and children to MUSLIMS (spec. the Mamluks). And it is also very telling that slavery was not redacted from the Roman Catholic code of canonical law until 1917 (in the midst of the First World War).

According to the Hadith record, Mohammed of Mecca encouraged slavery: Bukhari's Hadith no. 371, 2403, 2415, 2592, 3145, 4121, 4234, 5191, 6161, 6202, and 6603. He even proclaimed that gifting slaves was better than manumitting slaves. (Generally, whenever a man was abjured to manumit a slave, it was done as punishment to the slaver, not for the benefit of the slave.) Slaves were seen as property. This is illustrated by the declaration that there needn't be any tax paid for either a slave or a camel (Bukhari no. 1464). And in a discussion about trading animals for animals, we find that one Arab slave was worth two black slaves (Sunan an-Nasai no. 4621; alt. 5/44/4625).

But why such glaring dereliction on such an elementary point? It is no stretch to contend that the

Abrahamic deity could have easily included “Thou shalt not enslave anyone, ever, no matter who they might be” in the Mosaic Decalogue. {5} He didn’t. This is a problem. Especially considering the proscription against mixing meat and dairy seemed to have been a more pressing matter for the book’s authors.

If one is looking for a compelling case against slavery, one will wind up empty-handed when seeking it in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, or the Koran. When eating shell-fish and men laying with other men top the list of abominations, it is quite clear that the authors of the Torah had their priorities severely askew.

A typical retort to this point is: “But you see: Back then, mankind wasn’t ready to eliminate slavery.” Were the Hebrews really so dimwitted that they would not have been able to grasp such a simple proscription? We might look back to the late 3rd millennium B.C., when the code of Ur-Nammu declared that domestic servants should be allowed to own private property, to buy their freedom, and even to run their own businesses. Indeed, chattel slavery seems to have been quite rare in Sumer. Evidently, people were sufficiently insightful to recognize such problems in the Bronze Age.

So are we to suppose that the Sumerians simply more astute than the Hebrews?

But that’s not all. In the 18th century B.C., the code of Hammurabi stipulated conditions under which slaves should be freed (including when they married non-slaves). It permitted slavery under certain conditions, but had strict rules against the abuse of slaves. Moreover, slaves were always given the chance to purchase their own manumission.

And as already mentioned: While there may have been cases of indentured servitude in Pharaonic Egypt, there was no chattel slavery. Never were Hebrews—or anyone else, for that matter—enslaved in Egypt. (The pyramids at Giza were built primarily by paid laborers, who resided in their own domiciles; though there was likely indentured servitude involved.) So, yes: The vilified Pharaoh (likely Ramses II) was more enlightened on human rights than were the Hebrews he supposedly held in captivity (which, in reality, didn’t really happen).

According to Abrahamic lore, that would ALL have been before the Abrahamic deity delivered the “Aseret ha-Dibrot” / “Aseret ha-Divarim” to Moses (Yahweh’s compact with his chosen tribe: the Hebrews). So when the issue FINALLY WAS broached, what did Mosaic law stipulate? That the enslavement of human-beings was wrong? Nope. Instead, we find gems like Exodus 21:20-21 and Leviticus 25:44-46, which notify the Israelites that slaves are, indeed, their property. (Again: The former even gives permission to beat slaves to within an inch of their lives.) {5}

The supposition that Mosaic law is THE GOLD STANDARD of moral guidance is, then, not only preposterous; but mendacious.

What of the Exilic period (when the Torah was actually composed)? As it turns out, the Achaemenids—who ruled across Persia and Mesopotamia—had relatively strict taboos against enslaving populations; and seem to have forbidden chattel slavery. (The Hebrews in Babylon were not enslaved; and if the ruler, Nebuchadnezzar, would have opted to enslave ANYONE, it surely would have been them.) The Persians’ prohibition against chattel slavery continued on through the Parthians and Sassanians—as discussed in my essay on “The Long History Of Legal Codes”.

Ok. Well, then, what of Greece? In the 5th century B.C., the Athenian writer, Euripides of Salamis stated: “The slave is capable of being excellent in every way and truly equal to the free-born man.” In the 4th



century B.C., the Athenian writer, Alcidas of Elea stated in his “Messeniakos”: “God made all men free. Nature has made no man a slave.” Of course, this was not the over-riding sentiment of the entire planet at the time; but humanist principles were percolating beneath the surface throughout Classical Antiquity. And, clearly, such Progressive thinking was based on insights that had nothing to do with the Abrahamic deity.

People everywhere were capable of seeing what the authors of the Abrahamic scriptures couldn’t. And that capability existed since time immemorial.

Ok, then. But what of the Far East? In the 3rd century B.C., Mauryan Emperor Ashoka of Pataliputra [Bihar] (a.k.a. “Ashoka the Great”) broke new ground in the governance of civil society. The Edicts of Ashoka forbade slavery across India. Ashoka’s (Buddhism-inspired) doctrine of “dhamma” [the Pali version of the Sanskrit, “dharma”] was arguably the first declaration of human rights. And it was likely the first explicit articulation of humanism—emphasizing, as it did, tolerance of others and the dignity of every human qua fellow human, irrespective of who they might be. (Again: See my essay, “The History Of Legal Codes”.) The notion of “ahimsa” (that no one has the right to harm another sentient being) actually dates back FOUR MILLENNIA—specifically in the Jain tradition.

Also in the 3rd century B.C., China’s Qin dynasty became the first government in history to (attempt to) formally abolish slavery; though the success was short-lived. Later, in the 1st century A.D., Emperor Wang Mang campaigned to abolish the slave trade...again, without long-term success.

In the 1st century B.C., the Roman Stoic philosopher, Marcus Tullius Cicero of Arpinum propounded the humane treatment of slaves, articulating this position for far better reasons than anyone would until Thomas Paine wrote his treatise against slavery in the 18th century A.D.

Indeed, the Stoics advocated for universal education—including for women, for the poor, and—yes—even for slaves. A respect for mankind means that everyone is given access to public resources, a chance to pursue excellence...and achieve eudaimonia.

In the early 1st century A.D., Lucius Annaeus Seneca of Cordoba (“Seneca the Younger”) advocated for the civil rights of slaves—holding that human rights extended to ALL humans, no matter how low their socio-economic status might happen to be. Along with fellow Stoic, Gaius Musonius Rufus of Etruria, Seneca was against ANY maltreatment of slaves—including striking them or using them for sex. Seneca had his interlocutor declaim: “He is a slave!”... to which he replied, “No, he is a human being.”

Contrast this penetrating (and heterodox) moral insight to the moral depredations of the Halakhah and Sunnah, in which slavery is assumed as a matter of course—and is thus enthusiastically endorsed by those who codified each creed (replete with ROUTINE battery, rape, and slaughter).

In the 140’s, Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius enacted legal measures to facilitate the enfranchisement of slaves. He also promoted the principle of “favor libertatis”, which gave (purportedly) manumitted slaves the benefit of the doubt when there was any doubt about the legitimacy of the claim. These laws mandated punishment of a master when he killed his slave. Meanwhile, any abused slaves could be forcibly transferred to another master (by a proconsul).

The question, then, is: Such figures took this noble stand based on WHAT? Egypt, Greece, Rome, Persia, India, and China were surely places of which the Creator of the Universe was aware. So why the hesitation with the Israelites who lived between Moses and Solomon...and thereafter with the Judeans during the Iron Age...and then with Maccabees during Hasmonean rule...and then with the Pharisees and Sadducees

during the Herodian era...and then with the first Christians during Late Antiquity...and then with the Sephardim engaged in the Mediterranean slave-trade throughout the Middle Ages? (Jews were active slavers from Andalusia to Bohemia until the modern era.)

In light of all this, we find ourselves running out of possible excuses. To reiterate: The plea, “But at the time, the Hebrews were not capable of eradicating slavery” is groundless. In fact, such special pleading reeks of an inadvertent anti-Semitism—based as it is on the passive bigotry that is indicative of lower standards. Expectations for basic humanity must be universally applied. Certainly the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Persians, Indians, and Chinese were not (inherently) more astute than those dedicated to Mosaic law.

Alas, even in the advent of the Talmudic era (starting, it turns out, at the same time as Mohammed’s ministry; i.e. the early 7th century A.D.), the institution of slavery persisted. It is quite telling that, throughout the Middle Ages, the Radhanite Jews of the Maghreb who were active impresarios of the Mediterranean slave-trade...in concert with the Moorish (Islamic) corsairs. It is no coincidence that in medieval Arabic, the SAME WORDS were used for slave as for black African: “[h]Abib” / “Zanj”. “S-Da” means black: a reference to the subaltern Nubian people who were eventually enslaved. This lexeme was the basis for “Sudan”. To THIS DAY, Salafis harbor a malignant racism against Nubians; hence the recent genocide in Darfur.

Strange how—even then—those professing fealty to the Abrahamic deity had STILL not gotten the memo that there may have been some moral issues with the enslavement of humans.

As it turned out, the Muslim world would end up boasting the largest slave-trade the world had ever seen—stretching from the Barbary Coast to China. This was constituted not only of the Barbary pirates (who enslaved Europeans around the Mediterranean Sea), but of the mercantile dealings out of the city-State of Ormuz (which conducted the slave-trade between the African Horn and Swahili coast, Arabia, Persia, and into the Far East). {8}

So were there ANY moral inroads made during the Middle Ages? As it turns out: yes. Upon inaugurating the Ming dynasty in the 14th century, the (Buddhist) Hong-wu Emperor made a serious attempt to abolish slavery in China; yet his efforts were—ultimately—to no avail. Suffice to say: His laudable endeavor was not inspired by Mosaic law.

Back in Dar al-Islam, Muslims sold slaves primarily to other Muslims; though the Barbary slave-trade dealt regularly with the Sephardim of the Mediterranean basin—who were ALSO always eager to sell / purchase slaves. The Barbary pirates even sent slaves to Asia—as documented by the Chinese chronicler, Duan Cheng-shi in the 9th century. Donning the crucifix, Italian merchants (esp. the Genoese) purchased slaves from Mongols (who did not themselves enslave anyone, but were willing to hand over prisoners of war to slavers in a quid pro quo). They also purchased slaves from Kipchaks and Slavs, and sold them to the Mamluks. And as for the Radhanites? Well, they were willing to sell slaves to pretty much anyone willing to pay the right price.

Throughout the Middle Ages, Dar al-Islam hosted the planet’s most far-reaching slave-trade—vestiges of which can still be found in West Africa and on the African Horn. (To reiterate: Slavery REMAINS rampant in Islamic theocracies to the present day.) Century after century after century, slavers thrived—from the (Roman Catholic) Genoese on the Italic peninsula to the (Jewish) Radhanites on the Barbary Coast to the (Muslim) Ottoman slave markets of Kaffa on the Black Sea. During the Crusades, the (Roman Catholic) Franks engaged in the systematic enslavement of indigenous peoples. Of course, the Muslim world was arguably the most active in the slave-trade through the Middle Ages. From its inception

in the 7th century, enslavement of “kuffar” (non-Muslims) had been codified in doctrine. Black slaves were referred to as “Zanj”, Turkic slaves were referred to as “mamluks”, and Slavic slaves were referred to as “saqalibi”. Starting in the 16th century, Christian Europeans would initiate the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which eventually outpaced the (waning) slave industry in Dar al-Islam.

Meanwhile, slavery was rampant in the Christendom until the 19th century. The standard rationalization for the practice was BIBLICAL. In 1453, (Portuguese) Prince Henry’s biographer, Gomes Eanes de Zurara (who was the commander of the crown’s “Military Order of Christ”) published “The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea”. In it, he put forth an official defense of the African slave-trade—couching claims of black inferiority in explicitly religious terms.

So to attribute the abolition of the heinous practice to Judeo-Christian “values” OR to Islam is patently absurd. Abrahamic religion was certainly not helping.

Through the Middle Ages, up to the 19th century, it was the most ardent proponents of the Abrahamic religions that were the primary culprits—first the Muslims and Radhanite Jews across the Mediterranean, then Christians with the trans-Atlantic slave trade. When the case was (finally) made against slavery, it was based on eminently SECULAR principles. In 1759, when the (secular) Scottish philosopher (and political economist), Adam Smith held that all slavery proceeds from a “tyrannical disposition” (“The Theory Of Moral Sentiments”, p. 206-207), the Church of Scotland had nothing to do with it. At the beginning of 1775, when Paine published “African Slavery In America”, religious dogma played no role in his argument for abolition.

Ok, fine. ***But what about William Wilberforce?*** After all, he was a Christian who—at the beginning of the 19th century—advocated for abolition, was he not?

Indeed, he was. This (rightfully) celebrated British Methodist may have been the primary figure—at that particular time—when it came to efforts to bring the slave trade to an end. But he did not come upon this position ex nihilo. Like the reverend, Martin Luther King Jr. would over two centuries later, Wilberforce articulated his position in the idiom of the time; but he did NOT use church doctrine as the ultimate basis for his lofty enterprise. In fact, he and his fellow abolitionist Thomas Clarkson (a liberal Anglican) BOTH had a British fore-runner to inspire them (and, for that matter, to provide the philosophical groundwork for their noble stand). That trailblazer was none other than the secularist, Thomas Paine (who penned “The Rights Of Man” in the 18th century).

The degree to which either Wilberforce or Clarkson deigned to attribute their passion to pursue this laudable endeavor to their Faith is anyone’s guess; but it most certainly did not DEPEND ON their religiosity (qua subscription to ancient dogmas). Their position was not based on scripture...because they COULDN’T base it on scripture. Indeed, it was impossible for ANYONE to make the case on religious grounds—considering the Gospels of Matthew (24:51) and Luke (12:47). Compound those passages with Saul’s letter to the Ephesians (6:5) as well as his first letter to Timothy (6:1-2), and Wilberforce had no recourse to scriptural backing. This disjuncture with doctrinal fidelity is, after all, what made him such maverick. He was an iconoclast, not a champion of piety.

Wilberforce was no Reactionary. The heterodox preacher appealed to basic decency; not to theology. He knew full well that slavery was unequivocally supported throughout the Bible; so he was only able to make his plea about “Christianity” insofar as the creed extolled compassion for the downtrodden. It is no coincidence that the vast majority of his religious allies were QUAKERS: by far the LEAST doctrinal—and consequently, the least tribalistic—of devout Christians.

The same was the case across the Atlantic. In America, the most avid NON-secular abolitionists were the Quakers. (Recall that Martin Luther King's right-hand man, Bayard Rustin, was a Quaker.) In the event that ANY religious person advocated for abolition (or for civil rights in general), it was due to their conscience, not to their religious zeal.

Tellingly, Wilberforce's most virulent OPPONENTS in Parliament were *fellow Christians*...who, sure enough, justified slavery with a panoply of religious arguments; and ample scripture to back it up. In other words, it was only when Wilberforce BUCKED his religion (while still working in the spirit of the messages propounded by JoN) that he was able to take the noble position he took.

In the end, the campaign to end slavery finally occurred not due to the existence of this or that sacred doctrine. Wilberforce took the anti-slavery position IN SPITE OF his religiosity, not because of it. If anything, the response to Wilberforce and Clarkson should have been: "It's ABOUT TIME a Christian finally took a stand against slavery." Alas. Christianity has very little to do with what JoN actually preached; so the fact that Christians so ardently endorsed the practice surprised absolutely no one.

Bottom line: Speaking out against slavery in England—or ANYWHERE in Europe, or in America—entailed challenging received wisdom; and bucking religious precedent. It was by rebutting institutionalized dogmatism that Christian abolitionists made their case in the United States.

To recapitulate: It is no coincidence that the majority of such Progressive-minded Christians were Quakers—again: the least dogmatic and least tribalistic of all the world's denominations. To attribute their cause to their religiosity, then, is to completely miss the point.

Whenever headway was made in the realm of civil rights, it was always made in defiance of religious dogmas. Consequently, Jews and Christians were faced with a quandary when it came to abolishing slavery. (Many Muslims STILL ARE facing the quandary; as the Sunnah clearly endorses the practice.) For votaries professing Biblical tenets found themselves deigning to condemn something that their godhead CLEARLY thought was perfectly acceptable. This predicament was even more pronounced when it came to Islam: a Faith predicated on programatic subjugation. {4}

So what of the role of *secular* thought in exposing the iniquities of slavery? A good place to start is Thomas Paine—who penned "African Slavery In America" in 1775. The Marquis de Condorcet penned "Reflections On Negro Slavery" six years later (in 1781). Later, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow published the abolitionist anthology, "Poems On Slavery" in 1842. What did these three men have in common? They were all non-religious, and were all castigated for speaking out for civil rights. Castigated by whom? As it turns out, mostly by RELIGIOUS people. (Recall that John Adams—arguably the most religious of the American Founders—served as an attorney FOR slave-holders.) Meanwhile, it was Paine and Benjamin Franklin (both consummate secularists) who established the first American Anti-Slavery Society (which would later enjoy a resurgence in the 1830's). In the late 18th century, we should also note that the most important abolitionists were SECULAR.

In addition to those just mentioned, Alexander Hamilton (who might be characterized as a secular Episcopalian) was a key member of the New York Manumission Society. While John Jay was notable for attributing his participation in this society to his religiosity, this was likely a rationalization—and ingratiating justification rendered post hoc to tie his moral sense to his Faith. The evidence was overwhelming that no religious Faith was required to engage in the enterprise.

Ratios here are telling. For every (non-Quaker) Christian abolitionist, there were LEGIONS of Christian

ANTI-abolitionists...and still more abolitionists who were secular.

Note that Thomas Jefferson's first draft of the Declaration of Independence (the letter addressed to King George III of England in the summer of 1776) included the following indictment:

"This king has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating the most sacred right of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, capturing them and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere to incur miserable death in their transportation. This warfare on humans is the opprobrium of infidel powers. The CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain is determined to [maintain] an open market, where men should be bought and sold" (caps in the original).

In other words: Jefferson saw Christianity as the salient feature of the monarchy's iniquity on this score. (The passage was omitted from the final draft due the pre-established condition of unanimity. 2 of the 13 colonies—South Carolina and Georgia—dissented because they did not want the trans-Atlantic slave-trade to be listed as a grievance.

In his "Notes On The State Of Virginia", Jefferson weighed in on the iniquities of slavery, which would regrettably continue to be practiced (for the time being): "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep for ever; that considering numbers, nature, and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune—an exchange of situation—is among possible events; that it may become probable by supernatural interference! The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest."

(Ancillary note: The mis-guided notion that the American Republic was FOUNDED UPON slavery is tremendously disingenuous. Not only is it historically fallacious; it imputes motives to the Founders that clearly did not exist. The contention that the revolution was done IN ORDER TO SUSTAIN slavery would have come as a surprise to Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, and Alexander Hamilton...who were adamantly against the practice, even as they championed the revolutionary cause; and actively took measures to vanquish the heinous practice, which they saw as a stain on the founding of the new Republic.)

Putting slavery aside, we mustn't forget pivotal figures in the civil rights movement who were avowed secularists. Starting in the 19th century, we might recall female American icons like Harriet Tubman, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Ida B. Wells. **All secular.** There were also notable men like A. Philip Randolph, Robert Ingersoll, William Lloyd Garrison, and W.E.B. Du Bois. **All secular.** Such luminaries did not require religious dogma to make the points they made about civil rights. In fact, each of them eschewed religionism IN ORDER TO make the points they made.

Obviously, even when religionists saw the ills of slavery, they invariably expressed their advocacy in the terms they understood. Certain idioms resonated with certain communities, so those were the idioms in which the ideas were couched. It does not follow from this that the ultimate basis for abolitionism could be found in the sacred doctrine with which any given person may have been affiliated. On the contrary, it was the ability to rise above dogmatism and think for themselves that enabled people to (finally) embrace civil rights. {6}

To ascertain the degree to which we might attribute a "liberal" Christian's Progressive views to his religiosity, we might ask: Did Martin Luther King Jr. promote civil rights, protest the war in Vietnam, and advocate for organized labor because of the tenets of BAPTISM? Of course not. Is this to say that religion was irrelevant? No. It invariably played a role in ANYTHING that occurred; as it was a significant part of social life.

The role of Christianity in America's abolition movement illustrates this point very well. In America's antebellum South, churches were bastions of dissent—and sanctuaries from bigotry—for virtually all African Americans. Federations of churches were even more effective than solitary congregations—demonstrating the veracity of the adage about strength in numbers. For it was THOSE institutions to which black people turned during the tragically protracted Jim Crow epoch. Hence the role of the Southern Baptist Convention and the Southern Christian Leadership Council—which proved integral to the civil right movement of the 1960's. (Martin Luther King Jr. affiliated with both. King's compatriot, Bayard Rustin, was a Quaker.)

Context is important here. The SBC was originally formed to protect the entitlements of *slave-holders*. That it eventually underwent reform, and became a vehicle for the empowerment of African Americans (as well as a mechanism for orchestrating protest), was in spite of—not thanks to—the received doctrine of its churches. It's worth noting that other key organizations in the civil rights movement were either secular (CORE, the NAACP, the SNCC, and the ACLU) or trans-religious (as with the International Fellowship of Reconciliation; which included Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Freethinkers).

In assaying the relevant history, it is important to recognize that the *raison d'être* of these ecclesiastic federations was not the imposition of doctrine. Their prime directive was to empower their members—primarily with respect to the promulgation of civil rights. In other words, such religious organizations were primarily there for galvanizing, not for evangelizing. The black community was their base, not their target. Take away all the theological musings, and the places of worship would have served their purpose just as well...or, perhaps, even better. It was the communal aspect that was salient, not the dogmatic aspect.

Meanwhile, it's worth asking: How many WHITE southern churches were fighting for the rights of blacks? Almost none. Clearly, being a member of a church was not the pivotal factor; it was being a member of an oppressed group. To wit: It was a matter of having recourse to only one (dependable) mechanism to pursue enfranchisement: the local church.

In the south, black churches naturally became the emotional and social engine behind what was a moral—and ultimately legal—argument about civil rights for blacks. To reiterate: This happened in churches by default. (That is to simply to say: Due to the circumstances, such venues could not have been anything other than the churches. There was no viable alternative.) The local church offered a way for blacks to support each other in trying times...when virtually any other context for a large gathering would have been prohibited by the authorities. During each service, the message was uplifting: Take heart, for deliverance is at hand. Considering all this, it would have been odd for a black southerner to NOT have participated.

And so it went: Churches served as communal centers for a marginalized group. Their power was in coming together; and, in doing so, offering a leg up to those for whom nobody else seemed to care. The local church was the only means of solace that such people had available to them at the time. And—more importantly—it was an institution that gave blacks a sense of empowerment. The local church provided a place to sing, to count one's blessings, to congregate without drawing the suspicion of municipal officials (read: without fear of police). It was a safe haven in a hostile world: just what the doctor ordered.

So were churches valuable because of Christianity per se? No. They served as a mechanism for solidarity—and as the only dependable support network available to non-whites in the Jim Crow south. In other words, the local black church provided southern blacks with all the things that they desperately needed. Consequently, churches would inevitably play an integral role in ANY movement blacks sought to undertake.

Sacred doctrine was beside the point. The congregations' power was in being uplifting to those who may have otherwise been lost at sea; furnishing congregants with a poignant vernacular to express grievances and aspirations. And in order to coordinate their efforts for the greater cause, such congregations THEMSELVES needed to band together. Ergo the SBC and SCLC.

As they were uniquely primed for mobilizing nascent activists, it was these ecclesiastic federations that were repurposed for the task at hand. Their mission was to promote civil rights; not to promulgate ancient dogmas. Member churches served as a heaven-send for America's southern blacks, who were looking for one thing more than anything else: *hope*.

Such reassurance was much needed. In no other place could one find the crucial message: "You are not alone. And in spite of your plight, remember that god loves you." (The Promised Land is nigh, so forge onward.) Black people had needed to look forward to a "Promised Land" since the earliest years of their enslavement; and this was just as true during the Jim Crow era.

After all, a persecuted people needed SOME "good news"; ANY "good news". And it was possible to believe in the "Gospel" during even the most trying of times; as it involved a destination that was not of this world. It was a way to endure tribulation. In a sense, the role religion played for American blacks during the Jim Crow era informs us of the role religion ultimately plays for ANYONE. It was an illustration of the practical purposes religion serves.

The lesson here is clear. To attribute the brave civic activism of blacks who happened to identify as Christian to their CHRISTIANITY is to not give them enough credit. Moreover, it is to completely miss the point of what they were doing and why they were doing it. Their Faith imbued their cause with a shared narrative. It was a way to galvanize those who may have otherwise been distraught, discouraged, and completely disenchanted with life.

As with most things, religion is there to help make sense of things when nothing seems to make sense; to bring people together (especially those who are disaffected), and coordinate their efforts.

But there's a catch. Religion can be used for whatever purposes one wishes. To repeat: Southern WHITE churches vociferously FOUGHT civil rights. So suggesting that it was religion PER SE that was responsible for civil rights is completely erroneous.

To conclude: In pre-civil rights America, the local black church was—logistically speaking—the optimal place for a marginalized community to effect solidarity. The particular details of this or that sacred doctrine was beside the point. For, in the end, a religion is whatever its adherents make it (according to their aspirations)—be they southern blacks fighting for emancipation or racist WASPs seeking to rationalize the oppression of other races.

Clearly, it is not Christianity per se that we should thank for the civil rights movement. It was humans coming together to stand up for what was right, regardless of what this or that scripture might have said. Any civil rights activists who happened to be religious shared the same impetus—and ultimately worked from the same precepts—as secular activists. Both proceeded from an axiom that transcended social constructs.

This common ground enabled ALL abolitionists qua abolitionists to overcome sectarian divides. In other words: The driving force of the movement existed independently of religiosity; and the underlying principles did not come from any specific book.

Tying human rights to this or that people's creed / culture does a grave disservice to all the other peoples of the world; and risks the hyper-romanticization of the designated creed / culture. One is forced to proceed as if one's own culture were somehow pre-ordained to be the world's *quintessential* culture. The notion of a "best culture" makes absolutely no sense whatsoever; as no culture can be assessed wholesale (see the Postscript to "The Progressive Case For Cultural Appropriation").

When it comes to the history of programatic oppression, another fact is worth noting: Over the epochs, had ANY of the world's slavers honored one of the simplest moral axioms ever conceived, then no group would have ever felt entitled to enslave another group. It is to this "Golden Rule" that we now turn.

## **The Golden Rule:**

The most elementary rule of thumb for living (what most would consider to be) an ethical life is marvelously straight-forward: Refrain from doing to others what you wouldn't want them to do to you (or, more generally: Treat others the way you'd have them treat you). This protocol has two aspects: empathy and consistency. Thus it accomplishes two important things.

- In any given situation, it obliges one to put oneself in another's shoes. This is a repudiation of narcissism.
- It obliges one to check whether or not one is being consistent in the justification one is using for one's actions. (If it's bad when others do it, then it must be bad when I do it.) This is a repudiation of hypocrisy.

Above all, the axiom urges us to recognize that we are all fellow humans; and so should always be treated as such.

The widespread existence of this thinking speaks volumes. We are, after all, defined by our highest aspirations. It is safe to say that our moral character is a function of our ultimate ends. YET...insofar as one is driven by a pursuit of spoils in an after-death "life", one can not be said to be tapping into the better angels of one's nature. Cupidity (securing admission into Paradise for oneself) couldn't possibly play a role in probity, as morality is not about instrumentality; and moral principles are not self-serving.

The so-called "Golden Rule" was originally formulated by Confucius in the 6th century B.C. The problem with his formulation is that it was instrumental in nature: It was about maintaining civic order; and was seen as a matter of ETIQUETTE. (Propriety is not probity.)

Around the same time, Siddhartha Gautama of Lumpini (the "Buddha") preached a similar maxim, per the opening verse of "Dhammapada" chapter 10: "Consider others as you would yourself" (alternately rendered: "Pain not others with that which would pain yourself"). This was a more laudable encapsulation, as it was CATEGORICAL, and couched in terms of universal empathy for one's fellow man.

The Buddha also taught that one should never—under any circumstances—persecute another person; as one should have compassion for all people, irrespective of social status. A Jewish carpenter from the Galilee would echo this teaching five centuries later. (It's a shame that few who claim to follow JoN's teachings actually heed this admonition.)

In the Abrahamic tradition, the Golden Rule has made intermittent appearances. In the Torah, we find a crude version of the tenet in Exodus 22:21 and Deuteronomy 10:19; though—as we saw earlier—it is buried deep within a salmagundi of morally-dubious exhortations.



Unfortunately, the commonly-cited Leviticus 19:18 applies exclusively to Israelites with ONE ANOTHER; not to outsiders. It reads, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against / amongst YOUR PEOPLE; but you shall love your neighbor [fellow Hebrews] as yourself; I am the lord your god.” Who’s god? YOUR god (i.e. the Hebrew deity, who should be recognized above all other gods).

In other words: Favor the in-group.

What this oft-touted passage clearly does NOT say is: “Love all mankind; irrespective of tribal affiliation.” This adjuration was a recipe for tribalism; as it prescribes comity with one’s fellow tribesman, leaving the way entirely open for enmity toward outsiders. Such a strictly circumscribed scope of empathy privileges the anointed tribe whilst holding everyone else in abeyance.

Recall that (per Deuteronomy 23:2) any progeny of denizens of Beth Israel that were of impure / foreign blood (“mamzers”) were not included in the “congregation of Yahweh”...for up to TEN generations. So the sphere of empathy was explicitly a function of ethnicity (as well as fealty); and had nothing to do with shared humanity (which, by definition, would have extended to—well—all humanity). Taken in context, Leviticus 19:18 is not as peachy as it might seem at first blush.

Similarly, just a few verses earlier, verse 13 admonishes one not to defraud one’s neighbor (qua fellow Hebrew); rather than stating that one should not defraud ANYONE. Felicitously, verses 33-34 amends verse 2 by stating, “When foreigners reside among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigners [as opposed to neighbors] residing amongst you should be treated as native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were once foreigners in Egypt” (in keeping with Exodus 22:21 and Deuteronomy 10:19).

In terms of global human solidarity, two other passages in the Torah are worth noting.

**Genesis 9:6 states:** “Whoever sheds the blood of the people, by the people shall their blood be shed; for in the image of god has god made people.” {44} This can be taken in one of two ways: As an admonition against shedding the blood of fellow humans (since the transgression will redound to the perpetrator) ...OR... as an enjoinder to kill those who kill (per the eye-for-an-eye protocol stipulated in Exodus 21:24). Those of good will opt for the former (rather charitable) interpretation. Others are at liberty to opt for the latter interpretation.

Even worse, it could easily be read as an admonition that is only against harming fellow Hebrews...leaving the way open for killing anyone else.

**Deuteronomy 24:14 states:** “Do not exploit poor workers, whether they are fellow Israelites or immigrants who live in your land or your cities.” This is clearly an enjoinder for trans-tribal equity—in keeping with the adjuration of beneficence toward the stranger found in the aforementioned passages. Felicitously, this countermands the exhortations to divisive tribalism (read: ethno-centricity) found elsewhere in the Torah.

In the meantime, the Torah is riddled with enumerations of people Yahweh despises—including men with damaged genitalia (Deuteronomy 23:1) and prostitutes (Deuteronomy 23:18); not to mention all non-Hebrews.

The most renown articulation of the Golden Rule the Abrahamic orbit came from the Judaic commentator, Hillel the Elder in the late 1st century B.C. (Interestingly, both Confucius AND Hillel put forth this maxim when they were asked to encapsulate in a singular statement the essence of their teachings.)

For many, the “Golden Rule” has been erroneously associated with Christianity. Indeed, one might argue that the most important thing JoN taught was the Golden Rule—as attested in Mark 12:31, Matthew 7:12, and Luke 6:31. In addition, the parable of the “Good Samaritan” (Luke 10:25-37) enjoined trans-tribal empathy. And, of course, the reprise of “love thy neighbor” (from Leviticus 19:18) in Matthew 22:39 was a nice touch. And so it went: The Golden Rule made a fleeting appearance in the Gospels...before being summarily ignored by the vast majority of Christians thereafter.

As it turns out, this rule-of-thumb was not a unique insight at the time. ALSO during the 1st century, Roman thinkers propounded the same principle—most notably: Epictetus of Phrygia (in his “Enchiridion”). And around the time of JoN’s ministry, the Roman (Stoic) philosopher, Lucius Annaeus Seneca of Cordoba (a.k.a. “Seneca the Younger”) had already stated: **“Treat your inferiors the way you would want to be treated by your betters.”** (In other words: You shall be judged by how you treat ‘the least of these’.)

As it came to pass, the most sophisticated version of the Golden Rule came in the 18th century. Immanuel Kant’s “Categorical Imperative” took it a step further, focusing on the underlying principles on which actions are based rather than on the actions themselves. The moral imperative (born of what Kant dubbed “duty”) has two facets:

- Never use another human being as a means ONLY; but act only in a way that treats other humans ALSO as ends-in-themselves (that is: as beings with inherent value). Thus, one is to see all mankind as a “kingdom of ends”.
- Act only in ways that one would be willing to universal the maxim on which the action-in-question is based.

It is from the Categorical Imperative that ALL ethics flows.

A century later, Karl Marx offered a new perspective on human solidarity. More than being merely an advocate for the working class (namely: those who were being exploited), Marx was a humanist. He championed what he called **“gattungswesen”**, which is typically translated as **“species-being”**. The concept captures the essence of human-ness that all humans share. According to Marx, THAT is what must serve as the basis for all moral assessment.

Marx advocated for the sovereignty of every individual over his own life. In his famous manifesto, he was clear that the free development of each person is paramount; and is thereby precondition for the free development of **the whole**. (Only universal suffrage / enfranchisement makes a truly free society.) According to this eminently humanistic perspective, “species-being” is paramount—both for the individual and for the commonweal.

“Species-being” is corrupted by two things: parochialism and material acquisitiveness (in psychological terms: tribalistic impulses and cupidity)...both of which are born of avarice (whether collective or individual). When it came to economics (spec. the depredations of capitalism), the latter was salient; when it came to religion (and ethno-centricity), the former was salient. So it is the former on which we’ll focus presently.

Divvying mankind into disparate factions (groups that are often DESIGNED to be mutually antagonistic) is inimical to human solidarity. Marx was clear that his aim was to dissolve not just religionism, but the form of tribalism that is every bit as divisive: nationalism (esp. ethno-nationalism; as ethno-centricity was the most flagrant contravention of “species-being”). His thinking was that such dissolution would enable us to

fashion ourselves as members of a global community—in the vain of Diogenes and Thomas Paine: self-proclaimed citizens of the world.

For Marx, transcending our tribalistic impulses was the precondition for “species being” (read: humanism); and thus for civil society. For he recognized that tribalism led to the Balkanization of mankind; so he sought to flesh out the terms by which our innate tribalistic bent could be overcome. His answer was to emphasize our shared humanity; which meant thinking about—and treating—mankind as a unified tribe. William Godwin had intimated as much when he stated: “Men may one day feel that they are partakers of a common nature, and that true freedom and perfect equity, like food and air, are pregnant with benefit to every constitution” (vol. 1 of his “Enquiry Concerning Political Justice” c. 1793). As the Ancient Greeks would have put it: “agape” knows no particular tribe. And no particular tribe has a monopoly on righteousness. Such things transcend social constructs—be it tribal or institutional affiliation...or any kind of demographic demarcation.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul says that “LOVE” believes all things, hopes all things” (13:7). This is NOT the “agape” of the Ancient Greeks; it is devotion to the Abrahamic deity; and a recipe for unbridled heteronomy. It is the kind of “love” (fealty to the godhead; unwavering compliance / conformity) that exhorts one to be injudiciously dogmatic; even delusional. Hence, the Pauline message is not that LOVE conquers all; it’s that PIETY conquers all. (Needless to say, when piety is prized over love, it rarely ends well.)

So what IMPEDES us from espousing the Golden Rule? As it turns out: religiosity. How so? The symbiosis between religionism and tribalism. For this point, we can turn to Marx’s seminal essay, “On The Jewish Question”: a statement AGAINST anti-Semitism and FOR humanism (esp. the separation of church and state). What makes this prognosis unique is that it proposes that the best way to undermine anti-Semitism is for Jews to stop singling themselves out as a special group (spec. as a tribe that has been given the “inside track” on divine ordinance). This essay is pivotal to the present thesis, so I will be quoting it at length.

More than anything else, “On The Jewish Question” was a clarion call to eschew tribalism in all of its derisory forms: racial, national, religious, etc. Written during the autumn of 1843 when Marx was only 25 years old, the essay outlines a new way of thinking about all humans, irrespective of who they might happen to be. Hence his exhortation of everyone—irrespective of identity—to “*live in a universal human condition*” with one another. In this scheme, our shared humanity trumps all other concerns.

Thus Marx proposed that “species-being” is not only the primary means by which universal emancipation might be effected; it is the ultimate basis for global human solidarity. The brotherhood of mankind, he pointed out, is THE ONLY legitimate tribe (effectively the omni-tribe).

Meanwhile, a tribalistic mindset—especially religiously-instantiated—is guaranteed to preclude a humanist perspective. (Parochialism and cosmopolitanism are fundamentally incompatible.) The father of modern tribalism (read: ethno-centric hyper-nationalism) was Johann Herder, who was adamantly against humanism—which is to say that he was diametrically opposed to cosmopolitanism. Herder refused to recognize the universality of morality—as explicated by the likes of Spinoza, Kant, Paine, Marx, Rawls, et. al. This new tribalism was adopted by Johann Gottlieb Fichte, then Heinrich von Treitschke...which laid the groundwork for the (proto-fascistic) Teutonic cults (“Germanenorden”) and other Völkisch movements in Germany; and continued on through the asseverations of Prussian jurist, Carl Schmitt during the Third Reich. Pitting the in-group against the out-group is the basis of ALL tribalism—a Manichean way of seeing the world that I discuss in my essay, “Nemesis”.

Returning to Marx: Insofar as we succumb to a (religion-based and/or ethnicity-based) tribal mindset, **“the equality of all citizens is restricted in actual life...[a life that] is still dominated and fragmented by religious privileges.”** By espousing a Reactionary mindset (whereby stature is accorded based on tribal identity), Marx observed, society ends up being divided into a privileged in-group (which accords to itself exclusive entitlements) and, well, everyone else.

Why does tribalism undermine “species-being”? Marx’s answer: **“Because the lack of liberty in actual life influences law in its turn, and obliges it to sanction the division of citizens, who are by nature free, into oppressors and oppressed.”** Only by partaking in “species being” can we all—as fellow human beings—get past our latent tribal divisions; and preclude this inequitable eventuality.

But to do THAT, we must rid ourselves of consecrated dogmatic systems, which only serve to entrench the factions of mankind. {28} It is necessary, then, **“to abolish all religious privilege, including the monopoly of a privileged church. If, thereafter, some or many or even the overwhelming majority felt obliged to fulfill their religious duties, such practices should be left to them as an absolutely private matter.”** No better articulation of the separation of church and state has ever been stated: “On your own time; on your own dime.”

One’s Faith is one’s own (personal) affair: a decision to be made at each person’s discretion. Freedom OF (one’s own) religion entails freedom FROM (others’) religion. Such symmetry of prerogative is the only way to effect freedom of conscience for EVERYONE: one person’s religious observance in no way places any burden on the next person.

To illustrate the practical application of this insight, imagine applying it to the Israel-Palestinian conflict of the Post-War Era (a conflict OVER land BASED ON religion, whereby the antagonists are defined according to ethnicity): **“Man emancipates himself politically from religion by expelling it from the sphere of public law. Religion is no longer the spirit of the state.”** The only truly democratic government is a secular government: one that does not pick favorites. (For more on Marx’s view on government, see Appendix 4 of my essay on “The Long History Of Legal Codes”.)

The key, then, is to relegate religion to the (delimited) domain of personal rules (that is: rules one makes for oneself, at one’s own discretion). Religious freedom is paramount. **“The privilege of faith is a universal right of man.”** Marx may have just as well said that Faith is an individual prerogative; as the freedom of conscience (sovereignty over one’s own mind, and thus over one’s own life) is integral to a free society.

By adopting this cosmopolitan worldview (which, to reiterate, entails secular / democratic society), we find ourselves in a salutary state of affairs. Marx imagines a situation **“in which man behaves, albeit in a specific and limited way, and in a particular sphere, as a species-being: in communion with other [humans qua humans].”**

This requires the repudiation of tribalism. For, insofar as one defines oneself according to (and thus bases one’s thinking / actions on) one’s affiliation with this or that tribe, one **“is separated from the community, from himself, and from other men.”** Religion is the CODIFIED expression of this separation from the larger community of men. In other words: religion is not **“the essence of community, but the essence of differentiation.”**

At the end of the day, religiosity is **“only the abstract avowal of individual folly.”** It is predicated on **“private whim or caprice”** (stemming from what might be called “epistemic narcissism”). Put bluntly: **“The existence of religion is the existence of a defect.”**

That defect exists not just in the individual, but in society-in-general.

The key, then, is to rebuke regimes that define themselves according to this or that religious (or ethno-centric) agenda. **“The state which is still theological, which still professes officially the Christian [or any] creed...has not yet succeeded in expressing in a human and secular form, in its political reality, the HUMAN basis”** for civic life. Marx made clear that the only basis of civil society is a *human basis*, not a religious one. For only then is EVERYONE genuinely free.

Marx elaborated on this point thus: **“The question of the relation between political emancipation and [the repudiation of] religiosity becomes for us a question of the relation between political emancipation and human emancipation.”**

When surveying geo-politics, Marx noted that there is an indication of how we can know this. The correlation is illustrated by the fact that **“we criticize the religious failing of the political State by criticizing the political state in its secular form, disregarding its religious failings. We express in human terms the contradiction between the State and a particular religion (for example, Judaism) by showing the contradiction between the State and particular secular elements, between the State and religion-in-general, and between the State and its general presuppositions.”**

Thus: **“The political emancipation of...the religious man in general is the emancipation of the state from...religion in general.”** In being unconcerned with favoring this or that group of people along ethnic lines, or with upholding this or that sacred doctrine, **“the state emancipates itself from religion”** and thus from tribalism. For, in that case, the demos is no longer fragmented; with each faction promoting its own, narrow ideological agenda. Civic-mindedness knows no died-in-the-wool factions.

Marx recognized that religiosity is predicated on tribal demarcation: in-group vs. out-group. After all, tribalism is inseparable from the alterity it fosters. But without TRIBES, there can be no more Exceptionalism. **“There is no longer any religion when there is no longer a privileged religion. Take away from religion its power to excommunicate, and it will no longer exist.”** Without tribalism, religionism evaporates. After all, a religion’s very existence is predicated on an in-group and an out-group.

And so it goes with ANY form of tribal demarcation: If there is no alterity, then there can be no tribalism. ONE omni-tribe means NO tribes; as there are no more insiders vis a vis outsiders. No longer can any given group arrogate to itself special privileges. We’re all just fellow humans.

When one religious / ethnic group can no longer dominate / oppress / marginalize others (based on religious / ethnic difference), then contentious identities are no longer operative. **“How is a religious opposition resolved?”** Marx asks. The answer is astonishingly simple: **“By making it impossible. And how is religious opposition made impossible? By abolishing religion.”** At the end of the day: Religiosity can no longer serve to privilege one group over another; or to pit one group against another.  
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This eminently humanist way of thinking is a matter of what Immanuel Kant referred to as “maturity”. Marx noted that rising above religionism / tribalism was, indeed, a matter of maturation: **“As soon as Jew and Christian come to see in their respective religions nothing more than stages in the development of the human mind...they will no longer find themselves in religious opposition.”** Rather, they will find themselves **“in a purely critical, scientific, and human relationship.”** A scientific way of thinking, not a dogmatic one, **“will then constitute their unity.”** After all, science is universal; whereas dogmas are partisan.

Marx compared this maturation to **“snake skins which have been cast off by history, and man as the snake who clothed himself in them.”** (A more palatable metaphor may be a molting caterpillar shedding its cocoon to become a butterfly.)

There is a catch to this process of social-psychological evolution: **“Scientific oppositions are resolved by science itself.”** By contrast, religious disputation cannot be resolved by religion. Indeed, the vexations of tribalism cannot be ameliorated by recourse to tribalism; as one cannot address problematic thinking by recourse to the source of that problematic thinking.

Meanwhile, the beauty of science is that disagreements are addressed by MORE SCIENCE.

So we must approach problems in a meta-religious (i.e. SECULAR) way if we are ever to resolve our petty, tribal disputes once and for all. In embracing species-being, people **“will transcend their religious narrowness.”** This will happen **“once they have overcome their secular limitations. We do not turn secular questions into theological questions; we turn theological questions into secular ones. History has for long enough been resolved into superstition; but we now resolve superstition into history.”**

It’s worth recalling that, more than anything else, Marx was against systems of domination / oppression / exploitation. As is well known, he diagnosed the problem in primarily economic terms. (The problem was primarily what he referred to as “capitalism”; esp. rent-seekers.) But ALL hierarchal / authoritarian institutions were to blame; especially those that engendered a tribalistic mindset. This latter insight echoed Thomas Paine’s observation that “all national institutions of churches—whether Jewish, Christian, or Ottoman [Islamic]—appear to me as none other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and to monopolize power and profit.” Paine also identified the link between theocracy and illiberal government: “Persecution is not an original feature in any religion; but it is always the [predominant] feature of all religions established by law.”

Marx emphasized that the ultimate goal for the tried-and-true humanist is **“universal human emancipation.”** It must be noted that Marx singles out no particular religion here—though the issue that prompts the essay is Jewish parochialism (as he noticed his fellow Jews deliberately singling themselves out; then wondering why they were being singled out). He made this explicit: **“Criticism here is criticism of theology [per se]; a double-edged criticism of Christian and of Jewish theology.”** (I further explore Marx’s discussion of Jewish identity below.)

Problems arise, Marx observed, when one’s restricted tribal nature trumps one’s sense of humanity. Marx lamented that so many people failed to emancipate themselves from their tribal identity. He was careful to make clear that one adopts a tribal identity AT THE EXPENSE OF “species-being”. As a consequence, the superficial / accidental becomes the essential, and—regrettably—triumphs. As long as a man remains religiously-defined, **“the limited nature which makes him a [insert any religion-based identity here] prevails over the human nature which should associate him, as a person, with [all] other people; and it will isolate him from everyone who is not a Jew [or Christian or Muslim, etc.]”**

In the end, it is through tribalism that we see four grievous things occur:

- **“society is separated completely from the life of the state”**
- **“all the species-bonds of man are severed”**
- **“egoism and selfish need are established in their place”**
- **“the human world dissolves into a world of atomized, antagonistic parties”**

Tribalism (esp. as religionism) is the primary culprit in this scenario. Part of the solution, then, is Gentiles

without Christianity, Jews without Judaism, Moors / Arabs / Turks without Islam, etc. Only then, Marx held, can ALL ethnicities live as brothers—seeing and treating each other, first and foremost, as fellow humans.

The embrace of our common humanity was cast in terms of what Marx dubbed consciously-directed “life activity”. Man is a species-being insofar as he is able to define himself (his own existence) by what he chooses to do (by his “life activity”). Consciously directed life activity is what distinguishes humans from lower animals. Insofar as man is deprived of this prerogative, he is deprived of his humanity. In other words, insofar as man is deprived of sovereignty over his own mind / life, he is no longer being treated as a species-being but merely as an animal. THAT is what all societal dysfunction is based upon.

One group being dehumanized (treated as a mere animal) by another for the latter’s gain is, after all, what characterizes unbridled capitalism. Marx even obliquely expresses Kant’s Categorical Imperative: A species-being is **“a being that treats the [entire] species [all fellow humans] as its own essential being”** (ref. the Marx-Engels Reader; p. 76). A society predicated upon species-being is a Kantian “Kingdom of Ends”.

Like Kant, Marx’s conception of the categorical imperative involved individual prerogative (sovereignty over one’s own person). *“Man is a species-being...because he treats himself as the actual, living species; because he treats himself as a universal, and therefore as a free being”* (ibid.; p. 75). *“Free, conscious activity is man’s species character”* (ibid.; p. 76). Civic-mindedness involves freedom, not subordination, just as Kantian “duty” involves autonomy, not subordination. To recapitulate: The ultimate aim for Marx was **universal human emancipation**.

The conclusion here should be quite clear: The only in-group that should exist is humanity itself; which means that there is no out-group. This is analogous to saying—in the Judaic idiom—that the entire planet should be “Beth Israel” (if by “Israel” it is meant those who are in God’s good graces). In the Christian idiom: We are ALL part of the Body of Christ. In the most general Abrahamic terms: We are all God’s children. In Islamic terms, the Ummah [relevant community] is the entire world; and thus synonymous with “nas” [mankind].

Consideration of one’s fellow man must be done irrespective of nationality or ethnicity or any other demographic demarcation. Transcending all the gratuitous divisions we have erected for ourselves requires that we admit that they are spurious.

In modern geo-politics, this meta-principle (the ultimate standard by which we might vet any given principle) has been most explicitly translated into policy positions taken by Noam Chomsky. According to Chomsky’s approach, all people must conduct domestic and international affairs along the following lines:

- Never afford oneself (or one’s own nation) the categorical right to do something that one would not also afford everyone else; and afford them for the same basic reasons.
- Never impose categorical strictures on anyone that one is not also willing to impose on oneself (or one’s own nation); and impose for the same basic reasons.

Why? Because all humans qua humans MATTER. This is why any system of domination / oppression / exploitation is unjust.

All of Chomsky’s positions can be boiled down to this two-fold approach: the universal application of principles and the recognition that all humans must be treated as though they matter (as much as any other humans).

As with Kant, this entails that every human being is to be accorded value AS FELLOW HUMANS. (As with foreign policy, so it goes with socio-economic policy.) The point, then, is to maximize one's sphere of empathy, ensuring it encompasses all mankind (or, domestically-speaking, the entire polis).

Yet another way of thinking about the Golden Rule was proposed by John Rawls in his "justice as fairness" approach. In his magnum opus, "A Theory Of Justice", Rawls suggested everyone conduct themselves as they would from an "original position", whereby each person disregarded his own socio-economic status and demographic profile so as to ascertain what the everyman would want FOR ANYONE. The question becomes: What general rule would one endorse were one to discount one's own vested interests? Such impartiality requires deliberating from behind a "veil of ignorance" so that one could not be swayed by self-interest: invariably a function of one's own position in the scheme of things; which was, after all, a matter of historical accident. (Note: This explains why "identity politics" is fundamentally flawed. Rather than disregard one's identity, one is obliged to AMPLIFY it.)

Given this perspective, Rawls surmised that all reasonable people would converge on the same general rules. What sorts of rules? Those that ended up maximizing how well-off the worst-off in a society ended up being (irrespective of how much the best-off ended up flourishing). This harkens back to Jesus' entreaty that we are ultimately to be judged by how we treat "the least of these". After all, given Rawls' "veil of ignorance", in any given situation, one of the worst-off might be YOU.

While one wants there to be no ceiling, one wants the floor to be as high as possible (meaning: no impoverishment). The upshot is that, from the original position, nobody would want to enter into a society where anyone was dominating / oppressing / exploiting anyone else. For, for all one knows, one might—by accident of birth—find oneself in a marginalized group. ("If there's a chance that I could be a subaltern, then I don't want there to be ANY subalterns.") Plus, it turns out we'd all prefer to live in a society where everyone was safe, healthy, and well-educated; as we are all inter-connected in some way, to some degree.

The need to grapple with the precedent to "do unto others as you'd have them do unto you" has been with human society since the Bronze Age. So what have we learned—if anything—in the last few thousand years? Does religion help? Has it EVER helped? Steven Weinberg put it well when he noted that "with or without religion, good people would do good things and evil people would do evil things. But for good people to do evil things? That takes religion." He had a point. If nothing else, religion introduces a strong electro-magnet pull on any given person's (innate) moral compass; throwing off the calibration. Dogmatism is invariably a saboteur of Reason; as the former is predicated on heteronomy, whereas the latter is predicated on autonomy.

So the question remains: Sans religion, how can we have an objective basis for morality? As we will see forthwith, the answer is our innate capacity to reason—which is as solid a foundation as any for determining, well, ANYTHING. And how is this hampered by kow-towing to Messianic pretensions? Christopher Hitchens put it bluntly when he noted that "salvation is offered at the low price of the surrender of your critical faculties." He might have added that not only does it fetter "arete"; it fetters "agape". It precludes Kant's Categorical Imperative; it precludes Marxian "species-being"; and it precludes Rawls' "veil of ignorance".

Religion, we might note, is far more about indoctrination than edification. As it teaches one WHAT to think, not HOW to think. And it only serves to delimit one's scope of empathy. As it teaches one who to care about.

In the final analysis, we find that institutionalized dogmatism only impedes our attempts to live up to the



Golden Rule. But this does not mean that we immediately should start casting stones wherever we see cultic activity afoot. Karl Marx reminded us that in order to rectify tribalistic thinking in others, we must first correct it in ourselves. As he put it: ***“We have to emancipate ourselves before we can emancipate others”*** from the dysfunctional—and thus debilitating—thinking of tribalism / religionism. This brings to mind Shakespeare’s immortal line from Julius Caesar, that the fault is not in our stars, but in ourselves.

Presumably, then, one is not justified in criticizing others for their tribalistic / dogmatic proclivities until one has taken measures to liberate oneself from one’s own. Imagine the possibilities if everyone were to do this.

## **The Perils Of Divine Command Theory:**

A hallmark of religiosity is the unshakable conviction that one’s own tenets offer something vital that cannot be gleaned in any other way; at least not in their pristine form. Such a presumption stems from a dereliction of moral sense; as well as an abdication of intellectual integrity. Yet this presumption has undeniable appeal. Such appeal explains why it has been so prevalent throughout history.

In her memoir, “The Girl With Seven Names”, Lee Hyeonseo (a refugee from North Korea) noted: “A child wants someone to be in charge of the world.” She was, of course, referring to the purchase that “Juche” has upon the (brain-washed) citizens of North Korea. But the point is a general one: There is something in all of us that likes to think that someone is in charge; has everything under control.

The perk of religionism is that it enchants us. The danger of religionism is that it enchants us. Intoxication is a double-edge sword. Ecstasy feels great; yet it also deludes. As we all know, people are often seduced by that which is deleterious to their well-being. But, of course, that we are beguiled by X does not mean that X is worth exalting. That we are helplessly enamored with X speaks nothing to the merits of X. And as we all eventually learn, it is a mistake to suppose that if something offers some kind of gratification, it must be good for us.

Upon even cursory scrutiny, one finds that the notion of “received wisdom” (which was often supposed to have originally been received from “on high”) is a fatuous concept—regardless of the brand. This is the case whether one is talking about science, ethics, political theory, a handicraft, or anything else. That’s not to say that wisdom (be it raw knowledge or key insights) cannot be “handed down”, passed from elders to younger generations. It is merely to say that, AS WISDOM, its credence does not derive from the fact that people in the past happened to propound it. Credibility knows no historicity.

In any case, wisdom PER SE is never “ancient”. It is, by definition, timeless; and thus not predicated on any particular historical contingency. Moral principles are, after all, CATEGORICALLY universal; and so transcend time and geography. Nothing of true value (which may, by some accident of history, be included in this or that doctrine) is lost when one rises above a reliance on sanctified dogmas. The universal principles—and the sources of key insights—were there all along; and remain after the garish dogmatic investiture is stripped away. (For a concise explication of this point, see Kai Nielsen’s “Ethics Without God”.)

On the other hand, institutionalized dogmatism is, by definition, temporally bound; as is the case with ANY social construct. No matter how consecrated, it is only an accident of history; which means that it is not written in the stars. Even the most sanctified dogmatic system is a byproduct of various circumstances...that could have come to pass differently had this or that contingency been altered. The only way around this indubitable fact is to posit some sort of (divine) Providence.

So what of the heteronomy that lay at the root of dogmatism? Does it not undercut the sacrosanctity of the claims being made? Such quandaries are difficult to resolve. This is where “divine command theory” comes into play. Let’s see how it works.

Whenever a cultic mindset is operative, all “right thinking” is seen as a function of unwavering obedience. In other words: It’s all about *following orders*. The appeal of this arrangement is that it is so magnificently straight-forward. Epistemically-speaking, we can be certain of what’s “true” by just taking the deified figure’s word for it (be it a god or a demagogue). We get the satisfaction of being righteous without having to exert any cognitive effort. Everything’s already been figured out FOR us. This is perfect for those who seek a dopamine rush whilst remaining mentally lethargic.

Morally-speaking, the implication of this schema is equally straight-forward: You are “good” only to the degree that you COMPLY / CONFORM. (After all, piety is merely a function of compliance / conformity...done with some combination of zest and solemnity.) It should come as no surprise, then, that questioning the ultimate authority (which we know is the ultimate authority because we have DEFINED it as such) is discouraged.

Due to the authoritarian nature of such cosmogony, this is the case throughout Abrahamic scripture (that is, pace the invitation to engage in a “struggle with god” found in the Talmudic tradition...though at no point in the Hebrew Bible do any of the prophets intimate that Talmudic studies would be required in some way).

We are thus furnished with a wonderfully simple equation: rightness = obedience. But in order to obey, one needs a master issuing commands. Such is the nature of divine ordinance—whereby following the master’s orders is the sine qua non of all ethics; and the designated master is the ultimate authority. So go ahead and shuckle ’til your heart’s content. Just make sure you keep tassels on the corners of your garments! (That’s from Numbers 15:38-40.) Why? Well, because the ultimate authority said so. And if you have a hamburger, don’t you dare put any cheese on it! Why not? Because the ultimate authority said so (Exodus 23:19).

Divine command theory is faulty for a simple reason: It is relativist through and through; as it is whatever people make it to be. This is simply to say that it stems from nothing more than one or another social construct. As with any social construct, it is created by someone, somewhere, at some point in history...for some reason or another. In any case, what is right and wrong is determined by fiat (that is: according to the decrees of the designated authority, whether worldly or celestial).

How seriously are we to take this? Well, once we posit a cosmic master (i.e. a godhead), who’s word is unimpeachable BECAUSE he is the ultimate authority, we need only ascribe his say-so to whatever commands have been proposed. With the imprimatur of such an authority, there’s not much left to say.

What is already quite spurious becomes EVER MORE spurious once we consider that the “inside scoop” must invariably be conveyed via some sort of worldly intermediary. I enumerate myriad examples of revelations received in isolation (by self-proclaimed prophets) in my essay on “The History of Sacred Texts”; and I enumerated myriad examples of self-proclaimed prophets in my essay on “The History Of Exalted Figures”. I show that this gimmick has been used since time immemorial, in cultures around the world; and is still employed to the present-day.

Never mind that revelation always has to be delivered by a PERSON; rendering it subject to all the foibles that are germane to human nature. The question arises: Shall we heed the demands of a cosmic master? This question becomes especially pressing once we observe the character of the Abrahamic deity.

Existential questions also arise. Is life ultimately about placating a super-being that resembles a petulant child more than an intrepid moral authority? Thomas Paine put it well when he noted: “Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and torturous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we called it the word of a demon, than the word of God. It is a history of wickedness that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind; and, for my part, I sincerely detest it, as I detest everything that is cruel.” {3}

The protagonist of the Torah (Yahweh) was peevish, capricious, and sometimes inconsistent. At one point, he condemned the Pharaoh of Egypt for seeking to kill all the first-born sons in his kingdom as a punishment (Exodus 1:15-20); yet later perpetrates *that very crime*—infant genocide—HIMSELF as soon as he felt slighted (Exodus 11:4-6). So one can’t help but wonder: What kind of super-being are we dealing with here?

Yahweh was not only pathological vindictive; he was quite petty. In Leviticus 21:17-18, we read: “For the generations to come, none of your descendants who have a [physical] defect may come near to offer the food of god. No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; nor his nose or eyes be flat.” Wait. What? You read that correctly.

Is this the adjuration of a towering moral authority? Does such an edict indicate that we are dealing with the quintessence of compassion? Hardly. In both the Torah and the Koran, we are presented with a fickle, preening super-being...with an unquenchable thirst for vengeance. What are we to make of this?

But that’s just it: What WE are inclined to think is rather beside the point—as Abraham learned when commanded to slay his own son. Insofar as we take the notion of divine ordinance seriously, it’s not about a moral compass; it’s about appeasing a fickle overlord. All of morality is thereby reduced to a list of DECREES. In this way, every conceivable action can be distilled according to the dichotomy of “halal” and “haram” (that of which god approves vs. that of which he disapproves). The idea is to remain in the master’s good graces. If we succeed in placating this temperamental super-being, we are rewarded; if we fail, we are punished. That’s all there is to it.

Hence the ultimate way of categorizing things in ostensibly “moral” terms becomes: approved / unapproved by the anointed cynosure—be it worldly or celestial. (Recall that humans can be deified as well. Hence Stalinism, Maoism, Juche, and Scientology.)

The fatuity of divine command theory has been challenged since Socrates’ dialogue with Euthyphro of Prospalta—in which the audience was exhorted to challenge the notion that we can base all wisdom on the proclamations of the deities.

We might remind ourselves that what was—and has always been—wrong with divine command theory was not so much the *content* of the commands as the “COMMAND” part. “Do as I say; because I say so. If you don’t, you’ll be sorry!” is not the basis for a sound ethical framework...no matter how estimable the commands might happen to be; and no matter how magnificent the posited authority supposedly is. “Do my bidding” is only as good as the bidding happens to be; and even then (that is: even in the best-case scenario), such an officious protocol discourages people from thinking for themselves.

It is for this reason that it is the more mentally lethargic, credulous people who tend to slip into the most delusive forms of religionism. All the heavy lifting has been done for them. There’s nothing left to do but follow instructions. Trying to figure out good reasons is no longer necessary. The “figuring out” part has been outsourced for all eternity.

By signing up for this program, supplicants become intellectually inert—misconstruing their piety for probity. Worse, they are obliged to summarily dismiss all critics—deeming them some version of “evil”; equating impiety with iniquity. True Believers end up justifying all manner of meretricious actions, as it is seen through the rosy prism of “god’s will”. And because they have come to view their doctrine as inviolate BY DEFINITION, they will be incapable of seeing victims’ tears or hearing victims’ screams. Alas. With the imprimatur of the godhead, anything goes.

We saw earlier the conceit of cultic thinking. Religiosity typically takes the form of collective narcissism: “WE have exclusive access to the Truth...which is unavailable to anyone else, seeing as how they are not with our program.” Hence the wonderful impression that one group—and one group alone—has the “inside scoop” to, well, EVERYTHING. Which group might that be? Well, OUR group, of course.

Saner heads recognize the prudence of rejecting the maxim that the older the “wisdom” is, the more credence it may have. Otherwise, we are apt to play along with the charade. After all, the dogma-based approach to wisdom almost seems to make sense; just as it makes sense to the child seeking answers / guidance from a trusted parent. It is precisely this assumption that permeates the world’s most religious societies.

Endemic to any cultic activity is an obsession with that nebulous thing known as “ancient wisdom”, whereby older means better. We often fail to recognize that consecrated dogma is still just dogma. Put another way: “received wisdom” is legacy-dogma dressed up in regal vestments. “It was considered ‘wisdom’ in days of yore, therefore there must be something to it!” It’s as if antiquity somehow conferred merit.

The idea that anything and everything important that we know is to be attributed to some super-natural source goes back to the 3rd millennium B.C. The Sumerians believed that they had other-worldly beings (known as the “Anunaki”; offspring of the godhead, An) to thank for all their wisdom—an impression surely encouraged by the cabal of High Priests as a means to maintain their vaunted status as anointed intercessors. Such a scheme makes perfect sense; for once there exists sanctified lore, any insight—into the cosmos, into morality, into history, or into ANYTHING—can be rationalized in this manner. Those with a hotline to the gods (that is: those who have the ability to divine inner workings of the cosmos) are especially well-positioned to benefit from this charade; so they will do what they can to perpetuate the ruse.

Such magical thinking (esp. claims of divine revelation) proceeds as follows: These special powers explain how we know X to be true. That it is proclaimed by a “higher power” is why it is should be considered sacrosanct. In other words: It comes from a super-human source, so it MUST be unimpeachable. Hence the fantastical scheme serves as both explanation and justification.

This is, indubitably, the optimal way to hit two very big birds with one stone—answering two pressing existential questions: Why are we here? What should we do? It should come as little surprise, then, that those of the Abrahamic tradition are inclined to attribute any profound insight—no matter how elementary—to the existence of their own delivery system (be it Mosaic law and/or the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth and/or the recitations of Mohammed of Mecca). The suggestion is: BUT FOR having this or that Abrahamic scripture at our disposal, humans would not have an objective basis for morality...or even an ironclad *raison d’être*.

This contention is downright asinine. For not only is it demonstrably false; it demeans our very humanity. If anything, Abrahamic doctrine has positively HINDERED the development of civil society, and PREVENTED us from coming to an understanding of human origins, and the evolutionary psychology that

might inform our treatment of ethics.

The alternative is to acquiesce to antiquated norms. Shall we harken back to an inebriated Lot engaging in incest with his daughters? Shall we harken back to David sending a woman's husband to his death so that he could seduce her? Or perhaps we might refer to Numbers 15:32-36, where a man is stoned to death for gathering firewood on Saturday. It would seem that so long as we're not mixing fabrics or consuming meat with dairy or planting different seeds in the same field, all is well.

Yet when we look to things that actually matter to the well-being of PEOPLE, we find that such formalities are—at best—extraneous. We no more require religiosity to glean moral insights than we require an instruction manual to know that respect, say, for our parents is estimable...while domestic abuse is probably not a good idea. There is NOTHING in such intuitions about eating ham and cheese sandwiches...or covering our faces in public if we're female...or reciting certain (scripted) prayers at certain times.

Appeasing a tetchy master is certainly not the summum bonum of a meaningful life. (Pandering is NEVER a noble act, regardless of who we might be pandering to.) And when it comes to notions of original sin (and the need for atonement / redemption), our nascent humanity is certainly not best realized by being made to feel guilty about our human-ness...let alone being obliged to apologize for being human.

At the end of the day, there should be no guilt in being human. Any dogmatic system that makes us feel ashamed of our humanity is born of dubious motives. Insofar as the Abrahamic religions hold humanity to be inherently depraved (STAINED, as it were), they are merely creating (the illusion of) a sickness in order to offer a cure. The epitome of this is the notion of "original sin", whereby our VERY HUMANITY is a stain to be erased. This ploy—the standard gimmick of a snake-oil huckster—must be recognized for what it is: a vulgar ruse designed to guilt people into compliance / conformity.

It is no secret to even most children that following instructions PER SE does not a moral act make. This is especially so when the incentive to follow those instructions is to secure a reward for oneself (and/or to avoid punishment). And so it goes: Even when the Abrahamic scripture exhorts votaries to do nice things, it gives them bad reasons to do those things (when eminently good reasons are available).

Moreover, when readers are instructed to do something noble (e.g. be kind to people, abstain from usury, refrain from bribing public officials, etc.), no credible explanation for the goodness of such conduct is provided (other than "because god says so"). In other words, even as the audience is told to, say, help the wayfarer, the orphan, and the destitute, they are given no MORAL BASIS for doing so.

"Because it is written HERE" is not a moral foundation; it is a flimsy rationalization. For any given point of any given sacred doctrine is itself a historical accident. That is to say: A doctrine could have been virtually anything had it been formulated under different circumstances. While the canon of mandates / strictures dictates a certain set of permissible / forbidden behavior, it is an accident of circumstance what, exactly, that ended up being.

Even a blank check must be filled out with SOMETHING. It is up to the check-writer to decide what that is; but that decision is itself not necessarily delimited by moral bounds...which, of course, cannot be determined by the issuance of the check. Otherwise, we find ourselves engaging in circular reasoning with a radius of zero.

But that is precisely what makes divine command theory so enticing. When the source is the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong, its ordinance is BY DEFINITION unimpeachable; and its validity

incontrovertible. And THAT—whatever it happens to be—trumps everything.

By heeding commands that are seen as divine, what manner of folly are we asked to abide? Well, feel free to smash disobedient children against the rocks; just make sure you don't trim your sideburns (Psalm 137:9 and Leviticus 19:27 respectively). And feel free to stone a maiden to death if she is found to not be a virgin on her wedding night; but whatever you do, you mustn't wear mixed fabrics (Deuteronomy 22:20-21 and 22:11 respectively; also ref. Leviticus 10:6 and 19:19).

The *modus operandi* absolves us from having to employ any powers of discernment. Critical deliberation is completely un-necessary. (Don't question it; just follow it to the letter!) So Haredim won't even touch elevator buttons for 24 hours starting on Friday at dusk. Sane people can only be persuaded to do zany things via a hefty dose of religious zeal. Meanwhile, good people require no doctrine to simply BE GOOD.

Suffice to say, “graven images” never—at any point—posed a serious threat to civil society. Yet—against all common sense—one is expected to believe that such a frivolous thing was one of the primary ills holding the human race back from a better world.

What sort of pandemonium does this leave supplicants open to? We need only look to the Judean Settler movement in Palestine for an answer. Violently evicting goyim from their homes, destroying their communities, and seizing their land by force are imbued with Messianic legitimacy. Such atrocities are seen as copacetic by Revisionist Zionists, even as they make any decent person recoil in disgust. But True Believers don't cringe; they applaud. After all, they are just taking what is rightfully theirs...according to claims that the Creator of the Universe is a real-estate agent who is simply honoring a contract. They've fulfilled their end of the bargain, so it's time to claim what's theirs.

And what of the CHARACTER of the godhead found in the Abrahamic tradition? As we read the Torah OR the Koran, we quickly find that this emotionally needy, stultifyingly petty, temperamental super-being is completely full of himself. One can't help but wonder: Is this navel-gazing deity horribly insecure? Tragically lonely? Or just incredibly self-involved? {39}

Be it in the Torah or the Koran, the Abrahamic deity seems to spend a lot of time gloating. Over and over again in the Koran, he finds the need to proclaim “I know what you do not know” to his audience—a rather peculiar thing for ANY pedagogue to say, let alone the ULTIMATE pedagogue. In incessantly tooting his own horn, this celestial entity is evidently very proud of himself. {40}

When subjugation is the *sine qua non* of an entity with superior power, we are dealing with a ruler that sees mankind—above all—as subjects. Behold a dictator who measures his followers' fealty to the degree that they are sycophantic. In keeping with the Abrahamic tradition, the Koran tells us that the Creator of the Universe created mankind for ONE REASON: to worship him (51:56). What sort of entity is it that would create a race of sentient beings for the SOLE PURPOSE of being worshipped? Such an overweening personage would have to be very needy (if not utterly consumed by vainglory). And given the Abrahamic deity's penchant for “showing everyone who's boss”, we must wonder about his motives. It's almost as though the Creator of the Universe were PREENING. {41}

In sum, throughout Abrahamic scripture, we are presented with a super-being that is astonishingly self-absorbed and—in light of his peculiar recommendations—laughably short-sighted. In the authors' overzealous attempt to depict their deity as more than human, they ironically ended up rendering an all-too-human protagonist. Such are the pitfalls of anthropomorphism.

But, some may protest, this is not what many confessors of the various Abrahamic Faiths ACTUALLY

believe. When it comes to those who—as it is commonly put—do not take scripture literally, religiosity is merely spirituality couched in a certain idiom. Observance is a matter of communing with (that is: getting in touch with) the divine in the non-authoritarian sense; and thus in a non-dogmatic way. Granted. In that case, divine command theory is not salient, and the present critique does not apply. Yet, in that case, neither does (conventional) Abrahamic theology. (!)

The implication of this mode of apologetics is that the present indictment is but a straw man—that is: a disingenuous caricature of “god” as he REALLY exists in the Abrahamic tradition. Yet this contention is ITSELF disingenuous. Indeed, such dissimulation might be called “doppelgänger-manning”: the false accusation of straw-manning, employed as an evasive maneuver (to avoid any critical analyses of the actual issue-at-hand).

The present treatment is, indeed, precisely what the Judeo-Christian (and then Islamic) creed was originally based upon; and continues to be based upon by the most zealous adherents. Any modifications NOW are, well, just that: modifications. A diluted version of X that is more preferable does not magically exempt X from evaluation.

In any case: One can commune with the divine without any of the doctrinal accoutrements—nay: without ANY religious trappings whatsoever. But that is communing with the divine in the non-anthropomorphic—and thus: non-ABRAHAMIC—sense. This is something that Freethinkers often do; so religiosity is clearly not the pivotal factor when it comes to spirituality (or, for that matter, with experiencing the divine).

The fact remains: When probity is defined strictly in terms of compliance / conformity, we can be quite certain that an ersatz morality is at play. The “comply / conform or be doomed” routine is indicative of a morally dubious schema. How can we be so sure? Typically, well-intentioned authorities do not use FEAR as a means of persuasion...let alone of coercion. The use of fear to control people is, of course, as old as time; as intimidation is the most direct way to get people to SUBMIT.

Psychologically speaking, fear is the primary gateway to subservience. (It’s a small step from cowering to groveling.)

In the Hebrew Bible, the symbiosis of FEAR OF and FEALTY TO god is first articulated in Genesis 22:12. Psalm 9:10 even states that the fear of god is the basis for “wisdom”. (Here, “wisdom” is effectively just a euphemism for fidelity to Mosaic law—as with the early Semitic notion of “[c]hokhmah ila’ah”: wisdom of god.) This makes sense, as submission is rarely done out of love. (The relation of love to things like supplication and piety is more complicated. Needless to say, groveling / simpering is not a sign of “agape”.)

Throughout Christendom, “god-fearing” came to be an idiom for piety. It referred to an existential orientation characterized by conformity / compliance, not by rectitude.

The theme of obeisance through FEAR is not unfamiliar. The precedent continued into Islam. Take, for example, the admonishments in Surah 26 of the Koran, in which five different prophets say: “Fear god and obey me” (Noah in verse 108, Hud in verse 126, Saleh in verse 144, Lot in verse 163, and Shu’ayb in verse 179). The theme is best illustrated by the concept, “taqwa”, which conflates piety with fear of god. Here we find a kind of theological Stockholm Syndrome: gushing adoration for one’s subjugator.

Motivation-through-fear involves what psychologists call “fear appeal”, whereby one is inclined to revere what one is most intimidated by.

Moreover, well-intentioned authorities don't demand unconditional surrender; and they don't define morality primarily in terms of obedience. When those in power are confident that they are in the right, they encourage critical deliberation: "You are more than welcome to openly question everything I say / do." Anything less is an indication that something fishy is afoot.

Leaving aside the dubious character of the godhead in Abrahamic lore, the onus is on proponents of Judeo-Christian dogmas to demonstrate that the myriad strictures of Mosaic law or Pauline Christianity or the Sunnah—or of ANY sacred doctrine—are vital to the maintenance of civil society. It should go without saying that no moral system that emphasizes a prohibition on mixing meat with dairy can be taken seriously. For, at the end of the day, there are more important tenets to uphold than, say, strictures on ham and cheese sandwiches.

## **Consideration Of Relevant History:**

So what are we to make of the progression of moral systems over the course of human history? The Axial Age is a good place to start. Though Siddhartha Gautama of Lumpini (a.k.a. the "Buddha") did not write anything during his ministry in the 6th century B.C., we have a general idea of his teachings from the T[r]i-Pitaka (a.k.a. the Pali canon), which was composed in the centuries thereafter. (Such documentation started with the "Sammaditthi Sutta", attributed to S[a]ri-putta; then the "Sutta Pitaka", attributed to Ananda.) Bookshelves-worth of material have been written about Buddhist philosophy in all its variegated forms; but it should suffice to say that the Buddha preached in favor of compassion / temperance and against avarice / materialism.

During Classical Antiquity, even more bookshelves-worth of material have been written about Greek thought—much of which goes far beyond the scope of this essay. For our present purposes, though, it is worth noting the work of the Athenian philosopher, Aristotle of Stagira from the 4th century B.C. (esp. his "Politics"). For Aristotle, virtue was of value insofar as it contributed to the greater good (that is: to the commonweal). The well-being of the general populace was seen as an end in itself; so both moral and intellectual virtue was to be cultivated because it was amenable to that end. (For more on the insights found in Aristotle's "Politics", see Appendix 3 of my essay on "The Long History Of Legal Codes".)

By the time Judaic law was first codified (in Babylon during the Exilic Period), Athenian democracy had been established in Greece, King Lycurgus of Sparta had established equality amongst citizens, the Roman Republic was being governed according to the "Law of the Twelve Tables", and Persian rulers had instituted a regime recognizing universal human rights (ref. the "Cyrus Cylinder")...including policies that would liberate the Hebrews from their captivity in Babylon. Meanwhile, in the Far East, the "Rites of Zhou" had been composed in China and the Upanishads had been composed in India.

When it came to the development of civil law, the Abrahamic deity was clearly behind the curve. Human rights were pioneered in the Far East by the Mauryans (spec. Ashoka the Great) in the 3rd century B.C. Such programs—which were informed by Buddhist teachings—also emphasized socio-economic equality. By the time Ashoka issued his groundbreaking edicts, it was plain to see that Mosaic law played no role whatsoever in the development of civil society. The best that could be managed in the "Halakha" was Hillel the Elder's reiteration of the Golden Rule in the 1st century B.C., which—as we saw—had already been established in the Far East for centuries.

In Late Antiquity, pre-Islamic Alexandria boasted an efflorescence of thought. Hero made major inroads into mathematics and engineering in the 1st century; Sextus Empiricus revitalized Skepticism in the 2nd



century; and Plotinus of Lykopolis revitalized Neo-Platonism in the 3rd century. Theon and his daughter, Hypatia, became renowned pedagogues in the late 4th / early 5th century. Alexandria was also home to the greatest library of Antiquity. Here, it's worth surveying the great libraries of the ancient world. There are 25 worth noting:

- The **Sumerian** library at Uruk (c. 3400 B.C.)
- The **Assyrian** libraries at Nippur and at Ebla (c. 2500 B.C.)
- The **Hittite** library at Hattusa (c. 1900 B.C.)
- The **Amorite** library at Mari (c. 1900 B.C.)
- The **Akkadian** library at Agade [Akkad] (17th century B.C.)
- The **Assyrian** library at Nuzi (c. 1500 B.C.)
- The **Phoenician** library at Ugarit (c. 1200 B.C.)
- The **Assyrian** library of Ashur-banipal at Nineveh (7th century B.C.)
- The **Roman** “Vivarium” of Bruttium (6th century B.C.)
- The **Vedic** library at Taxsha-shila [Taxila] in Punjab (6th century B.C.)
- The **Persian** library at Ctesiphon in Mesopotamia (Classical Antiquity)
- The royal (**Chinese**) library of the Qin palace at Xian-yang (Classical Antiquity)
- The **Hellenic** library at Antioch (3rd century B.C.)
- The **Hellenic** library at Pergamum [Aeolia] (3rd century B.C.)
- The **Hellenic** library of Alexandria (3rd century B.C.)
- The **Hellenic** “Villa of the Papyri” at Herculaneum (1st century B.C.)
- The **Greco-Roman** library on the island of Kos (c. 100 A.D.)
- The **Persian** “Sarouh” [alt. “Sarouyeh”] at Isfahan (2nd century)
- The **Greco-Roman** library of Celsus at Ephesus (early 3rd century)
- The **Roman** library at Caesarea Maritima in Palestine (early 3rd century)
- The **Syriac** “Dayro d-Mor Mattai” on Mount Alfaf (c. 363)
- The imperial (**Roman**) library at Constantinople (4th century)
- The **Armenian** “matenadaran” at Etchmiadzin (4th or 5th century)
- The **Vedic** library at Nalanda in Bihar (5th century)

By the end of the 4th century (the century that the Christianized Roman Imperium became theocratic), many of the libraries located in Christendom had become—as the historian Ammianus Marcellinus remorsefully put it—“like tombs, permanently shut.” Hypatia was lynched; and intellectual activity was largely arrested. By the Dark Ages, even the ancient Talmudic academies in Mesopotamia (at Sura, Pumbedita, and Nehardea) were going defunct. (Note: The Judaic library of Geniza was established at Fustat in Egypt c. 870.)

We might note that during Late Antiquity, there had been some notable instances of religious tolerance (tolerance of alternate Faiths, so long as they did not disrupt the political order). After the transition of the Roman Empire to Christianity, secular ideals were still being proffered from time to time. Such sentiment was captured as late as the 520's by the NON-Christian Roman consul, Flavius Symmachus (son of famed philosopher, Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius), who stated in his “Memorandum”:

*“Whatever each person worships, it is reasonable to think of [all people] as one. We see the same stars, the sky is shared by all, the same world surrounds us. What does it matter which [Faith tradition] a person uses to seek Truth?”*

He wrote this while dwelling in the realm of the Ostrogoths, who were split between paganism and Arianism. This eloquent endorsement of pluralism was one of the earliest (explicit) articulations of the value of freedom-of-conscience.

It was in the late 1st century A.D. that Tacitus first put forth the separation of church and state, with his maxim, “deorum injuria diis curae” [leave offenses against the gods to the care of the gods]. This was a clear proscription against the State enforcing piety. Tacitus wrote this around the same time the authors of the Gospel of Matthew had Jesus of Nazareth enjoined his followers to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s, and to God that which is God’s (22:21).

As expressed by JoN, the idea was quite simple: Matters of religion did not fall within the jurisdiction of the State. Needless to say, the Roman Catholic Church opted to completely contravene this enjoiner from their own savior-God; as it did not serve the centers of power, who were more apt to use religion as a cudgel.

In Late Antiquity, the neo-Platonists (as with Plotinus), political philosophers (as with Cicero), and Stoics (as with Marcus Aurelius) contributed far more to human thought than Christian apologists (e.g. Augustine of Hippo). To this day, civil society owes much more to the former than to the latter. Religious zeal only served to DETER progress, not abet it. Illustrative of this is the fact that Plato’s Academy in Athens was closed by Emperor Justinian in 529. Why? Any thinking conducted outside the church’s strict parameters was heresy.

In fixating on the history of thought in “the West”, it is easy to overlook luminaries in the Far East. It’s worth noting Chinese freethinker, Wang Chong (1st century) and the Chinese mathematician, Zu Chongzhi (5th century). In India, the mathematician-astronomer, Arya-bhata of Patali-putra / Kusuma-pura penned the “Arya-Siddhanta” and “Ashmaka-tantra” c. 500.

By the time Mohammed of Mecca was born, the great Indian polymath, Varaha-mihira of Ujjain / Avanti was pioneering astronomy and mathematics. And while Mohammed was undertaking his ministry, the great mathematician / astronomer, Brahma-gupta of Rajasthan [Gurjara] composed his landmark work, the “Brahma-sputa-siddhant[h]a”, which broke new ground in algebra and geometry (providing an explication of the quadratic formula).

Pre-Islamic Arabia was far more Progressive than Arabia would become in the advent of Mohammed’s ministry. Before the Mohammedan movement, women could own and manage their own businesses: a fact made clear by Mohammed’s first wife, Khadijah. After Mohammed’s ministry, such a phenomenon was unheard of. Also in the pre-Islamic Middle East, there was little if any slavery. After Mohammed’s ministry, slavery became a booming business—wholeheartedly encouraged (even sacralized). It is incontrovertible that for both women and non-Muslims, the Middle East became a much WORSE place to live pursuant to the institution of Islam.

But what of Christian libraries? It was not until the 10th century that the Benedictine monastery at Cluny (France) became one of the great storehouses of Europe’s ancient manuscripts. THAT ended up being one of the few places that heretical documents were not destroyed by the Catholic Church. Thus Baghdad’s Bayt al-Hikma was not the only place where some scribes sought to preserve ancient manuscripts at the time. (See my essay on “Islam’s Pyrite Age” for more on this topic.)

There’s no need to review the long, meandering history of Judaism and Christianity here; but for our present purposes, a stark juxtaposition is worth noting. The Roman Catholic Inquisition (from 1184 to 1834) represented the world’s first experience of fascism. It would be difficult to imagine a more flagrant departure from—nay, outright repudiation of—the most fundamental teachings of the figure on whom a religion was ostensibly based. JoN was adamant about forbearance (i.e. NOT judging other people), being forgiving (even turning the other cheek when wronged), and flouting worldly authorities in order to be

godly (i.e. the separation of church and state).

Contrast the sordid legacy of the Roman Catholic Church to the estimable treatment of Christianity by the Quakers (starting in the 17th century). Suffice to say, the Society of Friends was far more in keeping with the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth—including his message about not being materialistic. When it came to giving aid and comfort to those of other communities, the Quakers—being the LEAST doctrinal—hewed most closely to JoN’s vision. It is no coincidence, then, that they were the most active when it came to the abolition of slavery. What, exactly, made the Quakers chart a different path? Clearly, something BEYOND scripture was at play.

Also in the 17th century, Hugo Grotius laid out the case for always keeping promises (honoring treaties and contracts), captured by his maxim: “Pacta sunt servanta”.

But religion continued to stymie moral progress. Recall that, in colonial New England, the heterodox minister, Roger Williams (who was influenced by the Stoics more than Abrahamic dogma), was banished by the Puritans for his Progressive ideas (that is: for his support for civil rights).

The recognition that there is a NON-religious basis for morality goes back to the Stoics of Late Antiquity (esp. Seneca the Younger). This was echoed by Baruch-cum-Benedict Spinoza in the 17th century with his iconoclastic masterpiece, “Ethics”. It was reaffirmed by David Hume in the early 18th century with “An Enquiry Concerning The Principles Of Morals”; and then by Adam Smith in “The Theory Of Moral Sentiments”.

The point was then CONFIRMED in the late 18th century, with Immanuel Kant’s deontic approach to morality (ref. his “Groundwork For The Metaphysic of Morals”), whereupon he outlined the Categorical Imperative discussed earlier. By the end of the 18th century, Thomas Paine had put the matter to rest—showing us that civil society was predicated on ideals that have no grounding in dogmatic thinking.

Several other great thinkers have contributed to making this fundamental point—notably: John Stuart Mill, Bertrand Russell, G.E. Moore, John Rawls, Peter Singer, and Derek Parfit. It should go without saying—though, unfortunately, it still sometimes needs to be said—that civil society has been built on principles that transcend any and all religiosity; as said principles are in no way predicated on this or that (sanctified) dogmatic system.

Such thinkers showed that moral principles exist independently of social norms, which—after all—are accidents of history.) THAT is what makes moral principles categorically universal—rather than “universal” merely by fiat. (For more on this point, see Kai Nielson’s “Ethics Without God”.)

As outlined in my essay on “The Long History Of Legal Codes”, the ideal of civil society—and of civil rights in particular—was operative long before it was adopted within the Judeo-Christian idiom; and oftentimes in ways that were far superior to the ham-fisted attempts found in the variegated Abrahamic doctrines—be it the Halakha or the Sunna. Humanity’s origins, its place in the world, and its inherent value were captured long before Judaism; and—again—in much better ways. Such ideations require Abrahamic scripture as much as modern chemistry requires alchemic ramblings. To suppose that the ideals we esteem NOW require the Mikra or the Pauline Letters or the Hadith is analogous to supposing that astro-physics requires astrological charts. {20}

Nothing worthwhile requires dogmatism—of *any* kind.

As explicated at the onset of this essay, the myth that Judeo-Christian “values” somehow served as the foundation for civil society in “the West” is false. Mosaic law is not—and has never been—operative when

our moral intuitions inform us that deeds such as lying, cheating, stealing, and killing are wrong. At best, religionism only supplements these moral intuitions. More often than not, though, it actually MITIGATES such intuitions; as it assigns all precepts an entirely spurious dogmatic foundation—thereby basing even the most estimable tenets on authority / tradition rather than on the lights of Reason. And as we saw in the discussion of the Golden Rule, religionism imports tribalism into the equation, thereby delimiting the scope of empathic concern.

As I show in “The Long History Of Legal Codes”: By the time Christianity emerged as a distinct religion, governments had been formulating the system of civil law that would create the ideal society for over a THOUSAND YEARS. And as we’ve seen in the present essay, for the next TWO THOUSAND years, any headway that was made (in terms of scientific and moral insight, as well as with regards to the furtherance of civil society) was made in spite of, not because of, ambient religiosity.

(Put another way: Whenever headway was made, it was NEVER attributable to institutionalized dogmatism. And whenever cult activity was operative in the governance of society, things rarely turned out well—as we were reminded with Nazism, Stalinism, Maoism, Juche, etc.)

While the Stoics were pushing the bounds of thought, formulating naturalistic explanations for the cosmos, prelates were convening ecumenical councils to address such pressing matters as how to celebrate Easter, how to best make sense of Trinitarian monotheism using arcane theological jargon, and whether or not the phantasmagorical rantings in the Book of Revelation should be included in the official canon.

Even as ecclesiastical authorities were quibbling over (utterly inane) theological conundra, others were attending to the elucidation of universal principles that did not depend on recourse to this or that sanctified canon of dogmas. In every case where mankind has gone horribly awry, it has INVARIABLY been because cult activity was afoot—be it Roman Catholicism or Salafism or the Khmer Rouge. In every case, dogmatism and tribalism were operative. In every case, deification was involved—whether it involved the worship of a supernatural entity or an actual person. Upon surveying the grotesque instances of illiberalism, we find that in NO case was an overabundance of free-thought the problem. Indeed, the promotion of free-thought is antithetical to all forms of tyranny (see the Appendix for more on this point).

In ALL cases of tyranny, some combination of idolatry and groupthink—enforced by some sort of puritanical, authoritarian structure—has been the culprit. The theme is consistent: Delusive thinking (due to some sacred doctrine), highly-concentrated power (amongst a cadre of socio-economic elites), and top-down control (demands for compliance / conformity). In other words, the OPPOSITE of what Kant, Paine, Marx, Rawls, et. al. were envisioning.

Taking all this into account, something becomes apparent. Without the Abrahamic tradition, mankind (specifically in the Occident, mired as it was in a bog of calcified Judeo-Christian dogmatism) would have arrived at the Enlightenment—and thus civil society—much sooner (probably OVER A MILLENNIUM sooner, if we were to omit the epoch of darkness between, say, Hypatia and Copernicus). {12}

The Dark Ages were, indeed, dark; and they were dark because mankind was addled—nay, accosted—by a thousand years of institutionalized dogmatism. The stifling, anti-intellectual climate induced by staunch religionism—systematically inculcated, often by draconian means—entailed widespread nescience. A mandate for hyper-dogmatism entailed an active hostility to anything that resembled knowledge of the natural world; a seething contempt for critical deliberation; and precluded any consideration of liberal governance.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the Dark Ages were characterized by a protracted intellectual sclerosis.

The Occident found itself in a didactic stasis that endured from the 5th century (in the advent of the fall of the Roman Empire) to the High Renaissance (which primed the Occident for the process of secularization that was the Enlightenment). Even as this epoch exhibited flickers of intellectual activity, it was mostly NON-Christian sources that could be thanked for any headway. In other words: Such flickers occurred IN SPITE OF, not because of, the ambient climate of religiosity.

It was only when the Occident managed to extricate itself from this dogmatic quagmire that any progress has been made. One shining light came from the (oft demonized) Mongols, who adopted the “Great Law”—inaugurated by Genghis Khan. Indeed, the separation of church and state was pioneered across Eurasia by the pre-Islamic (Tengri-ist) Mongols in the 12th century A.D.—reminding us how much of what those in the Occident now celebrate actually emerged in the Orient.

Compared to the uncivilized barbarians of medieval Europe, the Tengri-ist / Buddhist Mongols were—by far—the most sophisticated society in the world. Indeed, throughout the Dark Ages, it was the leaders of Roman Catholic dominion who were the true savages, not the Mongol “hordes” of the Eurasian Steppes. It was not for nothing that the most renown English thinker of the age, Roger Bacon, noted that the Mongols “have succeeded by means of science.” While they are “eager for war,” Bacon noted, the Mongols have advanced so prodigiously because they “devote their leisure to the principles of philosophy.”

Due to the groundbreaking precedents set by Genghis Khan, the Mongol Empire pioneered more than just the separation of church and state (i.e. government-sanctioned religious freedom). Under Genghis, then under his grandson, Kubilai, the Mongols also broke new ground when it came to other positions:

- ***No divine mandate; nor claims of divine revelation.*** Thus: Nobody deigned to speak / act on behalf of a deity.
- ***Against materialism, decadence, extravagance.*** Genghis Khan discouraged frivolity. (That said, the Mongols were not prudes. They loved to imbibe and have lots of sex; and were not averse to festivity.) Genghis encouraged a simple, non-materialist life-style; and surely would have been horrified by hyper-consumerism (esp. conspicuous consumption). Despite the incredible wealth and power he accumulated, he made his position clear: “I wear the same clothing and eat the same food as the cow-herds and domestic herders. We all make sacrifices [together], and so all share in the wealth.”
- ***Against slavery; nor marginalization along ethnic groups.*** Captured peoples were never enslaved. (Note, though, that Genghis Khan showed little mercy to aristocrats. Also, some captives could be conscripted for labor; but not permanently.) A significant portion of the loot seized from invasions was distributed to widows and orphans. NO ONE was allowed to go impoverished.
- ***Against kidnapping and torture.*** Even after war, captives were admitted back into society, and even given prominent administrative positions based on merit...except, that is, for aristocrats, of which Genghis Khan was always very suspicious. They often met a dire fate. Also, the Mongols were not averse to handing some prisoners of war over to slavers as a quid pro quo.
- ***Against racism.*** No race was favored over any other. Nobody was oppressed / marginalized based on ethnic background. The Mongols referred to themselves as the (pluralistic) “People of the Felt Walls” [“tuurgatan”], in which ethnicity was irrelevant.
- ***Against caste systems.*** There was no caste system. To reiterate: Genghis Khan was especially wary of aristocracy; and often had aristocrats eliminated on principle.
- ***Against nepotism.*** There was no favoritism based on bloodlines (barring advantages afforded to descendants of Genghis Khan; though oftentimes only after they’d proven their mettle).

Genghis Khan was, in a word, Progressive. A voracious conquerer, he also valued equity. He made it clear that his “**Great Law**” applied just as much to rulers as to anyone else. Alas, his progeny hewed to this

principle for only about half a century. {32}

In the 13th century, at the behest of Kubilai Khan, the Mongols pioneered mass printing (and the wide dissemination of literary material)...almost two centuries before Gutenberg. In fact, so far as the promulgation of literacy goes, the world owes more to Mongol dissemination of texts than to the Europeans.

The Mongols actively promoted universal literacy; and instituted public education wherever they went. Under the direction of Kubilai, the school of astronomy and medicine at Tabriz (Persia) was established, where Muslim luminaries like Rashid ad-Din of Hamadan eventually studied.

Many of the ways the Mongols broke new ground ended up benefiting the Occident. Historian, Jack Weatherford put it well when he noted that, in expanding their domain, “not only had the Mongols revolutionized warfare, they also created the nucleus of a universal culture and world system. This new global culture continued to grow long after the demise of the Mongol Empire. And through continued development over the coming centuries, it became the foundation for the modern world system, with the original Mongol emphases on free commerce, open communication, shared knowledge, secular politics, religious coexistence, international law, and diplomatic immunity.” Even as the Europeans underwent a Renaissance, “It was not the ancient world of Greece and Rome being reborn; it was the Mongol Empire, picked up, transferred, and adapted by the Europeans to their own needs and culture” (“Genghis Khan And The Making Of The Modern World”; p. 234, 237).

In the 13th and 14th centuries, the (Tengri-ist) Mongols established freedom of religion wherever they went, including places where there had been no such freedom: Kashgar, Bukhara, Samar-kand[a], Termez, Ghazna, Peshawar, Hamadan, Arda-bil, Tabriz, Isfahan, Astra-khan, etc. {32} Genghis, Ogodei, and Kubilei Khan erected numerous places of worship for their Christian, Muslim, Taoist, and Buddhist constituents. Kara-Korum was arguably the most religiously mixed, tolerant city in the world during the Middle Ages.

Recall that Tengri-ists were monotheists. Mongke Khan once stated: “We Mongols believe in one god, by whom we live and by whom we die; and toward him we have an upright heart.” The ultimate goal was uniting all people under the Eternal blue Sky; not by forced conformity, but simply by way of global human solidarity. (One might say that the Mongols were the first globalists, both in terms of culture and commerce.) Mongke added that once a people acceded to Mongol rule, “by the power of the Eternal God, the whole world from the rising to the setting of the sun shall be at one in joy and peace.”

The Middle Ages demonstrated—incontrovertibly—that the sway of religion (be it the impresarios of the Roman Catholic Church or Salafi mullahs) was inversely proportional to the development of civil society AND inversely proportional to progress in science / philosophy. Luminaries like Duns Scotus, Thomas Aquinas, and John Wycliff were ANOMALIES, not testament to the benefits of institutionalized dogmatism.

We should also note that it is not just the Abrahamic strain of cult activity that the “West” has (largely) risen above...and still strives to move beyond. It has more recently struggled to get past other grotesque creatures of its own creation—most notably, Soviet-style communism (replete with its duplicitous “Marxist” packaging) and fascism (Roman Catholic and otherwise)—that is: other quintessentially Occidental versions of cult activity.

So far as freedom of religion went, Genghis Khan was—thankfully—only the beginning. By 1762, the (adamantly secular) Voltaire had penned his landmark “Treatise On Tolerance”. That was followed by

Thomas Paine's "Rights Of Man" in 1791; then John Stuart Mill's "On Liberty" in 1859. Pace the Quakers, at no point did religionism have anything to do with promoting freedom of religion. As we've seen, this (wonderfully liberal) ideal was an ancient one. Recall the articulation of religious tolerance by Roman consul, Flavius Symmachus in the early 6th century.

So what happened that finally lifted the Occident out of the Dark Ages? Sure enough, *Renaissance humanists* like Lorenzo Valla, Pico della Mirandola, Niccolo Perotti, and Matteo Palmieri explored the theme of global human solidarity. How so? Not by more vociferously scrutinizing ancient scripture. They were appealing to something quite different—something that could be found in ANY human mind under the right circumstances.

This intellectual awakening involved the scientific contributions of Copernicus, Bacon, and Newton; the mathematical contributions of Leibniz; the political contributions of Locke; and the philosophical contributions of Spinoza and Hume. Such trailblazers set the stage for the Enlightenment. Tellingly, NONE of them were religionists in the doctrinal sense.

So how, exactly, might we attribute this sudden efflorescence of knowledge to Abrahamic religion? Are we to suppose that Christians had bided their time for over SIXTEEN CENTURIES (and Jews for over TWO MILLENNIA) before someone recognized what their holy books were REALLY trying to say. Put another way: Are we expected to believe that Christians had been getting their scripture wrong for sixteen centuries before someone finally got around to heeding its deepest messages? This would seem to be the only explanation for what actually transpired; yet it is so far-fetched, one can't help but chuckle at the mere suggestion. (If only people had more stringently hewed to scripture, the Enlightenment would have occurred much sooner!)

While the Enlightenment primarily occurred in the Occident (though, as we've seen, not entirely DUE TO the Occident), it was largely about REBUFFING much of the Occident's most hallowed traditions (while adopting certain advances from the Orient). In other words, this cosmic leap in progress was a matter of eschewing Judeo-Christian dogmas in favor of new ideas. The Enlightenment was enabled by a paradigm shift, not by revanchism.

This is illustrated by the overtly Reactionary nature of the Roman Catholic Church. With his encyclical, "Mirari Vos" in 1832, Pope Gregory XVI proclaimed that it is "false and absurd—even mad—that we must secure and guarantee to each one liberty of conscience." Free-thought was verboten in the Church thereafter. Critical thinking is held in utter contempt to the present day.

Did some great minds happen to be religious? Yes. But this prompts some obvious questions (with equally obvious answers). Shall we thank the Catholic Church for the achievements of Johannes Kepler and Blaise Pascal? Shall we thank Presbyterianism for the contributions of Lord Kelvin and James Clerk Maxwell? Shall we suppose that Michael Faraday owes his scientific insights to his Sandemanian sympathies? Shall we thank Lutheranism for the discoveries of Leonhard Euler? Shall we attribute Tycho Brahe's observations to the fact that he was temporarily affiliated with a Circassian Abbey?

Surely, the erudition of Michel de Montaigne can't be accounted for by the perorations of the Vatican curia. And Augustine Cauchy did not glean his insights by hewing to the Nicene creed. Such men accomplished what they did in spite of the fact that they sometimes articulated themselves in the idiom with which they were most familiar—speaking of the Almighty, nature's god, or even the glory of god. To attribute the virtues of such luminaries to their affiliation with this or that religious tradition is to confuse BECAUSE OF with IN SPITE OF.

So how much, exactly, did the Church of England have to do with Robert Boyle's achievements? The answer is apparent, it seems silly to even pose the question.

We might also note that theism does not mean dogmatism; for it turns out that most great minds who were theists were DEISTS, not religionists—as with Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, Copernicus, Galileo, Leibniz, Locke, (Adam) Smith, Diderot, and Montesquieu...on through Immanuel Kant, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson...to John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, and Charles Darwin. (This remained the case for such luminaries Freeman Dyson, Eric Cantor, Albert Einstein, and John Rawls: all non-religious, all Deists.)

As mentioned, the Enlightenment was far from perfect—what with its sometimes overzealous emphasis on rational thinking and materialistic cast of mind...which, it turned out, could morph into purely INSTRUMENTAL reason, which undergirded a raft of dysfunctions like hyper-consumerism and free-market fundamentalism. Such problems were brought to light by the Frankfurt School—the legacy of which was tragically hijacked by ardent proponents of (the utterly vacuous movement of) post-modernism and (the patently illiberal movement of) political correct-ness.

Any judicious critique of the Enlightenment reveals that it had faults and shortcomings—like any other period in human history. As Kwame Anthony Appiah noted, even as we find that “the actually existing Enlightenment was insufficiently enlightened, it is not an argument that Enlightenment [per se] was the wrong project.” Any errancy that occurs during a noble enterprise does not discredit the enterprise. Thus any dysfunction that may have besot the meandering process of secularization / liberalization does not mean that said process was inherently flawed.

Regarding the need to reassess “received wisdom”, Appiah made the point that “the advance of reason” in the modern world does not stem from “grater individual powers of reasoning. [Rather, it is] the result of the fact that we have developed institutions that can allow ordinary human beings to develop, test, and refine their ideas. What’s wrong with the theory of witchcraft is not that it doesn’t make sense, but that it isn’t true. And to find that out—in the way scientists gradually developed our modern understanding of disease—requires enormous, organized institutions of research, reflection, and analysis.” Such robust deliberation—and the critical inquiry that impels it—never happens BECAUSE OF institutionalized dogmatism; it happens IN SPITE of it.

As freethinkers like Thomas Paine (and, later, John Stuart Mill) made very clear, civil society (spec. liberal democracy) is not predicated on institutionalized dogmatism. That the Enlightenment ended up occurring in the Occident (western Europe) is an accident of history, not a reflection of the provenance of the Judeo-Christian dogmas that saturated the region up until then. To treat this as some kind of vindication of Judeo-Christian religiosity, then, is to entirely miss the point.

In reality, the only truly objective basis for morality is a SECULAR one. If anything: It is primarily due to a REJECTION OF Abrahamic religionism that has enabled societal progress...at all key junctures. As for prohibitions against lying, stealing, cheating, and killing, those who are impressed by the inclusion of such elementary points are setting the bar abysmally low. In any case, that Judeo-Christians INVENTED such elementary strictures would come as a surprise to the world’s Zoroastrians, Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists...as well as all other morally upright people across the planet who are outside the Abrahamic tradition.

As I hope to have shown, not only does the Abrahamic tradition not have a monopoly on probity; it has arguably done the WORST job in promulgating it over the course of its long history.



If one would have gone to London in 1859 and asked John Stuart Mill how much he had based the insights articulated in his landmark work, “On Liberty” on Judeo-Christian doctrine, he would have surely responded, without hesitation: “Not at all.” Two years later, when he published “Considerations On Representative Government”, had he been asked the question, he surely would have given the same response.

This would have also been the response of the founders of the American republic. Thomas Paine corroborated this in 1776, during the lead-up to the war for independence, when he wrote the pivotal tract that triggered the revolution and inspired a generation: “Common Sense”. The point would become even clearer with his “American Crisis” essays...and CLEARER STILL with his “Rights Of Man”. With the rise of humanism since the Enlightenment (read: an objective basis for morality in strictly secular terms), this fact has only become more and more ineluctable.

That ethics requires no dogmatic system was made no more apparent than when it came to women’s rights; where the glaring deficiencies of Abrahamic lore are especially flagrant. The scriptures of either Judaism or Christianity (or Islam, for that matter) not only didn’t help, they detracted from female empowerment in palpable ways. (For a historical survey for women’s rights, see my “The Empowerment Of Women” series.) The Bible is pretty clear that women are not equal to men. Women—the Torah tells us—should worship their husbands, “and he shall rule over thee” (Genesis 3:16). It was all downhill from there.

The Pentateuch oozes with patriarchy. In Mosaic law, women—along with slaves and livestock—were considered legal chattel (that is: something for a man to own); as the anti-coveting commandment stipulates (a wife is—effectively—her husband’s property). Deuteronomy 22:28-29 notifies us that a Hebrew girl who is raped can be sold to her rapist. Leviticus 27:3-7 specifies that women are worth between 1/2 and 2/3 as much as men. And, by the way, make sure women are forced to sleep outside for a week when they are menstruating (Leviticus 15:19-24). Needless to say, there were no women allowed to participate in the Sanhedrin. Today, there is no more flagrant misogyny than is found amongst Haredim / Hassidim (the ultra-Orthodox denizens of Beth Israel).

The male-centric precedent was upheld in the Christian tradition. The subordination of women is established in Saul’s first letter to Timothy 2:11-12: “A woman must receive instruction in silence, with complete submission; and I [god] do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority of / over a man; but to remain silent”). And in his first letter to the Corinthians 14:34, Saul insisted that women should remain silent in church. To ensure the point was made loud and clear, Saul wrote to the Ephesians that a wife must always submit to her husband (5:22-23); and then repeated this claim to the Colossians (3:18). Also in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul states that the head of a woman is a man (11:3) and that women were MADE FOR men (11:6-9). And, remember, women should NEVER be allowed to speak up when men are in charge...or even be allowed to braid their own hair. (!) For, it was believed, only MEN have something worthwhile to say.

Women are referred to as “the weaker vessel” in first Peter 3:7. Demanding female subservience was par for the course in the Judeo-Christian tradition—as is made crystal clear by the canonical scripture of Nicene Christianity, which is rife with misogyny. It should come as little surprise, then, that the (hyper-patriarchal) Roman Catholic Church has such an opprobrious record on this issue. (Fundamentalist Christian denominations infamous for misogyny include Puritans, Calvinists, Pentecostals, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Mormons.)

The Koran is no clarion call for women’s rights either. The putative “Final Revelation” (which was, in should be noted, addressed explicitly to a male audience) puts this odious legacy into overdrive. The most

notorious Koranic passages are verses 3-4, 15, 22-25, 33-34, and 43 of Surah 4. (Also cringe-worthy are verses 223-237 and 282 of Surah 2; as well as verses 4-6, 8, and 13 of Surah 24—all of which make clear that women are inferior to men.) It is no wonder that Aisha is reported to have stated that she knew of no women who suffered as much as Muslim women (Bukhari no. 5825).

Of course, this is in keeping with the teachings of Mohammed of Mecca, wherein we are notified that women are intellectually inferior to men (Bukhari's Hadith; chap. 12, no. 2658; alt. 1/6/301, 2/24/541, and 3/48/826) and that hell is populated primarily by women...because they deserve it (Bukhari; 1/2/29; alt. no. 304). No kidding. This makes sense, as women are less intelligent and less morally capable than men (Muslim's Hadith; no. 241).

When it comes to women's rights, things were a starkly different story when it came to SECULAR contributions. It's worth exploring this, as women's rights is as good a metric as any for civil society. We might start with the Stoic philosophers of Late Antiquity, who argued for equality of the sexes; holding that sexual inequality was contrary to the laws of nature.

Prior to the emergence of Islam in Arabia, women had rights—as attested by the fact that Mohammed's first wife, Khadijah, owned her own thriving business. According to Bukhari's Hadith (3/43/648), the Ansari women (of Yathrib) had authority over their men before Islam; something that was SCOFFED at.

In the 1670's, French philosopher, François Poullain de la Barre explicitly addressed his female readers, stating: "The [analytic] mind has no sex whatsoever. You are endowed with Reason. Use it. And do not sacrifice blindly to anyone." Needless to say, this insight was not gleaned from ancient scripture.

The Marquis de Condorcet advocated for suffrage in an article for *Journal de la Société* in 1789; and published "For the Admission to the Rights of Citizenship For Women" the next year (1790). The year after that (1791), French activist, Olympe de Gouges published the "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen", which was inspired by the secular "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" from two years earlier. Also in 1791, Thomas Paine argued for women's rights in his "Rights Of Man". Mary Elizabeth Wollstonecraft penned "A Vindication Of The Rights Of Women" the year after that (1792).

***These figures were all secular.*** This was no coincidence. It comes as a surprise to nobody that women's rights have consistently been championed in societies that are the most secular. When Italian reformer, Giuseppe Mazzini championed women's rights in 1860 (ref. his "Duties of Man"), he needed to make no appeals to religious doctrine. Roman Catholicism had absolutely nothing to do with it. And so it went with John Stuart Mill, who completed "On The Subjection Of Women" the very next year (1861).

A century later (1960), Roslyn Pope came home from Europe to a segregated South and channeled her frustrations into writing "An Appeal for Human Rights". She made her case by appealing to something that had been available to mankind for thousands of years: universal moral principles. But what, pray tell, might THOSE be? And where might they come from?

## **Universal Moral Principles:**

How are we to be so sure that moral principles are CATEGORICALLY universal; and not just (circumstantially) universal by fiat? To review: Kant's Categorical Imperative has two facets.

**First:** All humans (qua sentient, rational beings) have inherent value; and so must never be treated as a means only, but always as ends in themselves as well (hence society seen as a "kingdom of ends").

**Second:** We must be able to universalize the maxim on which we deign to justify any given deed. (We must be willing to have everyone else in the world justify any of THEIR actions by recourse to the same maxim we are using to justify our own actions.)

In a sense, morality's universality is BUILT IN. That is: Moral principles are universal BY DEFINITION.

When it comes to sacred doctrine (especially when predicated on "divine command theory"), an arbitrariness is introduced. The supposition is that all of ethics can be boiled to a check-list of dos and don'ts. It's as though all of mankind were in kindergarten, and morality could be distilled into a set of simple instructions. According to this schema, OBEISANCE is seen as the basis for uprightness. The "catch", as we've seen, is that THAT ends up being little other than a function of power structures (i.e. a reflection of the interests of whichever authority has been accorded the most power).

This is a recipe for illiberal (authoritarian) regimes, not for liberal democracy. Civil society, it turns out, is predicated on individual autonomy. This is why I use "moral" in a Kantian sense: morality is deontic in nature. (Rectitude has nothing to do with obeying orders.)

This conceptualization can be held in stark contradistinction to instrumental "morality": the ersatz morality of Machiavellians and Reactionaries (which is to say: the "morality" of those who base right and wrong on utility and/or the "say so" of some anointed authority. This is the "morality" of the wheeler-dealer; and so varies from circumstance to circumstance, as it is subjected to one or another agenda (e.g. currying favor with the powers-that-be, placating an overlord, securing salvation for oneself, etc.)

Here, I hope to show that REAL morality is based on that which is categorically universal—transcending all psychical / social constructs (which are, after all, nothing more than accidents of history). By contrast, dogma-based "morality" is a faux morality; as it is NOTHING BUT an accident of history.

This fundamental distinction is no more clear than the imperative to counter—through sheer act of will—our inclinations to indulge in tribalism. For probity is no more a function of collective utility than it is of individual utility. As Kant pointed out, the only time principles really matter is when they don't serve one's own interests—be they communal or personal. In other words, morality finds purchase primarily when it is inconvenient.

For better or worse, homo sapiens must contend with their evolved (human) nature. This involves overcoming our proclivity to be tribalistic. We are naturally predisposed toward tribalism—and, for that matter, toward institutionalized dogmatism—for reasons that have been (mostly) explained by evolutionary psychology. We are also predisposed to prize utility over all else; as we homo sapiens are eminently pragmatic creatures (and creatures of habit). If X seems to work, we tend to go with X...and stick with it in perpetuity.

Suffice to say: Our inborn psychological template did not evolve to prime us for cosmopolitanism; nor did it prime us to live in an egalitarian global community. Universal human solidarity is something we need to work at; it is not our default setting.

Yet it is with our primally hard-wired "human nature" with which we must contend. Hints of a moral compass are found in virtually every culture that has ever existed: punishing cheaters, enforcing some system of obligatory cooperation, sharing in the fruits of the community's toil, discouraging deception (and all forms of fraud), etc. (See Matt Ridley's "The Origins Of Virtue".) There are several principles—as well as themes and archetypes—toward which all peoples naturally gravitate. (For more on this, see my essays on "Mythemes.") That we ALL SHARE this "human nature", then, is what serves as the basis for any ethical

framework.

So what of the emergence of such tenets within religious contexts? It is important to ensure we do not draw false conclusions from what happen to be felicitous occurrences. What fundamentalist Christians sometimes refer to as “Christian values” are oftentimes simply UNIVERSAL values / principles that have been attributed to their own creed post hoc. That is: They are values / principles that Christianity—due to fortuitous historical accident—happens to countenance.

It is here that our own language games often mislead us. Conventional nomenclature may insinuate that such estimable doctrinal points are INHERENTLY Christian (that they have no basis BUT FOR Christianity). The implication, then, is that anyone embracing such tenets is simply mimicking Christian teaching; and is ultimately forced to GROUND said embrace on Christianity (wittingly or not). Such casuistry is quite common; yet it is entirely specious.

It is, of course, a salutary accident of history whenever ecumenical doctrine happens to embrace something that is CATEGORICALLY universal. But such precepts exist independently of any given dogmatic system. That is to say: The ultimate basis for the purported values is a secular one—and can be articulated as such. The fact that one or another religious community happens to have sanctified those values says nothing about the credence of the over-riding creed. The thing with consecration is that ANYTHING can be consecrated if it happens to fit within the prevailing narrative.

That such underlying principles are based in HUMANITY ITSELF is immediately obvious once we find that Zoroastrians and Tengri-ists and Sikhs and Jains and Hindus and Buddhists and Confucians and Taoists and countless other Oriental traditions (i.e. traditions that have nothing to do with the Abrahamic lore) champion the most vaunted ideals found in the Abrahamic tradition. Clearly, there is something else going on—something that transcends this or that creed. For all that we have in common is our human-ness; and so there is a moral compass that resides in all humans qua humans. This is the case regardless of cultural milieu; and holds irrespective of what has or hasn’t been sacralized. It goes for Druids as much as it does for Druze.

Hence a shared morality is concomitant with our shared humanity; which exists as such independently of the memetic environs in which one happens to find oneself. (There is a reason that something as basic as “common courtesy” transcends culture.) For, in the end, we are all part of the same community—the omni-tribe known as mankind, working from the same operating system.

Recognition of this fact is the basis for “cosmopolitanism”, a concept that dates back to the 4th century B.C. The first thinker to put forth this humanistic ideal was the Cynic, Diogenes of Sinope, who coined the term “kosmo-polites” (the basis for the term “cosmopolitan”): citizens not of nations, but of the world. Cosmopolitanism urges us to recognize the equal, INHERENT worth of all human beings.

Zeno of Citium later held that, as rational beings, humans have an ultimate grounds for a common idea of justice / law c. 300 B.C. This was followed by the Stoics, who grounded that worth in (practical) Reason, and our innate capacity to intuit moral principles. Stoics held that the (global) human community is the source of our most fundamental moral and social obligations; and so it the sine qua non of our highest aspirations.

The capacity for Reason makes us all fellow “kosmo-polites”. To be fellow humans is, then, to be fellow citizens. By mapping the existential onto the political, our shared humanity is seen to entail (what is effectively) a global polis. The idea was to define any given person first and foremost as a fellow human. This is the quintessence of anti-tribalism, and is inimical to Identity Politics.

In the 1st century B.C., Marcus Tullius Cicero of Arpinum then picked up the ideation, though his cosmopolitanism was somewhat mitigated by his proto-nationalistic loyalty to the Roman Republic. He posited “iustitia” (justice) as symbiotic with “beneficentia” (beneficence). The basis for this symbiosis was human fellowship, which transcended all tribal affiliations, all socially-constructed boundaries, and any other divisions that tended to Balkanize mankind. The key was UNIVERSALITY: Humanity was an end in itself.

Cicero’s use of the term, “humanitas” equated kindness with human-ness; and even civilization with humanity itself. He even pre-dated the parable of the Good Samaritan (told in the Gospels over a century later) with his own message of helping the foreign wayfarer. In his “De Officiis” (I), Cicero weighed in on philanthropy: “A man who graciously shows the way to someone who is lost kindles a light from his own light. For his own shines no less because he has lit another’s.” Cicero was adamantly against avarice and vengeance, so eschewed any ethical system that involved greed (read: material accumulation) or tribal honor (read: retribution).

Cicero went so far as to put forth a Roman theory of “ahimsa”. In his “De Officiis” (III), he spoke of a single (natural) law that mandates that we never harm others. Cicero characterizes this over-arching principle as an integral part of the natural order; and thus “the law of peoples” [“*ius gentium*”]. He even referred to it as “nature’s reason, which is divine and human law.” The idiom of bringing human law into alignment with divine law isn’t about following orders; it is about an internal synchronicity. It is based on autonomy, not on heteronomy. This is precisely what Kant proposed in his “Groundwork For The Metaphysic Of Morals”.

Cicero elaborated on this point: “If nature prescribes that a human being should consider the interests of a human being, no matter who he is, just because he is human, it is necessary that according to nature, what is useful for all is something in common [“*res communis*”]. And if this is so, then we are all embraced by one and the same law of nature. And if that is so, then it is clear that the law of nature forbids us to do violence to anyone else.” The Jains couldn’t have said it any better.

The bottom line is simply that the human community is a GLOBAL community; so civic duties (that is, standards of justice) are not (ad hoc) tribal, they are (categorically) universal. Cicero points out that it is inconsistent to hold this principle (ahimsa) for those in one’s in-group (however defined) yet deny it to those in the out-group simply because they happen to be foreigners. For to countenance such a disparity is to “tear apart the common fellowship of the human kind.” Here, we see a foreshadowing of Marx’s “Gattungswesen” [“species-being”] (see Appendix 4 of “The Long History Of Legal Codes”).

In the early 1st century A.D., Lucius Annaeus Seneca of Cordoba (“Seneca the Younger”) stated that the human community is “truly great and truly common”. To find it, “we look neither to this corner nor to that, but measure the boundaries of our nation by the sun.” In other words, it is a global community.

In the 2nd century, the Roman Stoic, Marcus Aurelius advanced this ideal in his “Meditations” (IV), where he stated: “If reason is common [to all mankind], so too is law. And if this is common, then we are all fellow citizens. If this is so, we share a kind of organized polity. And if that is so, the world is—effectively—a city-State.” Marcus then stated: “As I am a human being, my country is the world.” In keeping with this ideal, he prized actions performed not in the service of one’s own tribe, but in the service of all mankind. The scope of concern was the entire human community. For Marcus, human fellowship trumped tribal demarcations.

The next iteration of the “citizen of the world” ideation was in Immanuel Kant’s “Kingdom Of Ends”.

Moreover, Kant revived the “citizen of the world” in his disquisition on international affairs: “Perpetual Peace”.

And we might also note Thomas Paine’s quip that “the world is my country”. Paine was, indeed, a citizen of the world: the quintessential “cosmopolitan”. In other words, he adhered to Kant’s Categorical Imperative; he embraced what Karl Marx would later dub “species-being”; and he proceeded from what John Rawls would dub the “original position” (whereby one considers another person irrespective of rank, stock, creed, or other tribal affiliation). Socio-economic status doesn’t matter, bloodlines don’t matter, religion doesn’t matter, and nationality doesn’t matter.

We might also recall that “The world is my country, mankind my countrymen” was used as an epigram by William Lloyd Garrison...echoing back over two millennia to Diogenes.

So what of the scenario in which good people—who happen to be religious—attribute their goodness to doctrinal fidelity? Here’s the thing: In order for sacred texts to work, one must bring to bear one’s own moral intuitions (i.e. that which inheres within us ALREADY). From birth, one possesses the wherewithal to intuit moral truths before one even opens the book; for that is the only way the book can fulfill its purpose. {16} So, in a way, by attributing their good nature to their religiosity, such people aren’t giving themselves enough credit.

The upshot is that our morality exists independently of the scriptures that some claim we all need for said morality. At the end of the day, the most that a sacred text can do is serve as a HEURISTIC—a handy pedagogic device that conveys an important message to those who are most persuaded by compelling narratives. (Dry, turgid disquisition tends not to captivate in quite the same way. We humans are suckers for a good story.)

But what of the deficiencies in our human nature (our penchant for tribalism, dogmatism, idolatry, and immediate gratification). Today, our highest endeavors ask us to live beyond some of our design constraints. (One might say that the possibility-space dictated by those constraints is hampered by the “lower functions” of our brain.) What may have made perfect sense—practically-speaking—many thousands of years ago (e.g. the embrace of zany superstitions) no longer attains. This is especially the case once morality is taken into account—as mother nature is amoral; and the universe is indifferent to what is and isn’t “humane”.

In a nutshell: Our most primordial drives do not necessarily inform the best way forward (esp. in the modern world). Such “primal instincts” have everything to do with what was pragmatic in pre-civil environs; and not much to do with what is objectively moral. Now that civil society is the standard to which we aspire, many of our primally-hardwired predilections must be over-ridden. How? By making use of our critical faculties. That can only be done pro-actively (i.e. via mental discipline, not to mention sheer will-power). We have the capacity to invoke the better angels of our nature; but that take a concerted effort. And NONE of that involves obeying orders.

Religion—by its very nature—can do nothing in the service of this enterprise. Recourse to a Reactionary mindset (whereby one is inextricably wed to “received wisdom”) is doomed to fail if our ultimate goal is universal human solidarity. For—due to different accidents of history—each group invariably “receives” different “wisdom”.

The laudable principles so often touted by Judeo-Christian apologists, which they ascribe to Mosaic law, are far from exclusive to Mosaic law. {2} They are, it turns out, universal; as they derive from basic insights available to all human beings—irrespective of circumstance (and thus across time and space). In

other words, they categorically transcend culture; and so are not merely the byproducts of this or that sequence of historical contingencies.

Such universality is illustrated by the incidence of certain tenets in alternate traditions. Behold the five “vratas” of Jainism:

- Don’t lie
- Don’t steal
- Don’t engage in sexual indiscretion
- Don’t harm any sentient creature
- Don’t covet that which others have

As we see: honesty, fairness, fidelity, kindness, and temperance are prized; while things like deception, theft, betrayal, cruelty, and cupidity are eschewed. This is ALSO illustrated by the five moral tenets (“sin” / “sila”; viz. a code of conduct for upright living) of Theravada Buddhism:

- Don’t lie
- Don’t steal
- Don’t cheat
- Don’t harm others
- Don’t become inebriated

Ring any bells? Such proscriptions should sound familiar to Occidental (and Muslim) ears. The “catch” is that NONE of this is predicated on a belief in the Abrahamic—or in ANY—deity.

Indeed, these tenets are indicative of HUMANITY; they are not the exclusive provenance of a particular tribe / legacy. They can even be found in myriad ethical systems that predate the Axial Age. When we look at the principle tenets of Buddhism (listed above), we find everything addressed that fetishists of the “Judeo-Christian” tradition love to brag about: not harming one’s fellow man (“ahimsa”), self-discipline / self-restraint (“dharma”), and all the rest. The ancient Greeks spoke of “agape” (universal love) and “enkrateia” (mental discipline).

Probity, then, is not predicated on any specific religious creed. And as for wisdom (what the ancient Greeks dubbed “arete”), we are dealing with something that each and every human can cultivate, of his own accord, by his own devices. In his Nichomachean Ethics, Aristotle pointed out that certain things are intelligible to any and all human beings, irrespective of any differences of language / culture—as we are all, ultimately, HUMANS. “One can see in one’s travels to distance countries the experiences of recognition and affiliation that link every human being to every other human being.” This is the basis for The Good, which is not a product of this or that culture; as it CATEGORICALLY TRANSCENDS all social constructs.

Clearly, such tenets resonate with virtually everyone around the world, irrespective of cultural milieu, as they stem from moral intuitions with which all humans are equipped. Kant called this innate capacity the “divine law within”. (Note that each of the above strictures is a corollary of the Categorical Imperative.) Evolutionary psychology has demonstrated that such moral intuitions are innate; which is to say that they are categorically—rather than just incidentally—universal. This explains why certain tenets crop up over and over again, in unrelated social contexts, across the epochs...and around the world (see Dan Sperber’s “Religion Explained”).

Certain insights transcend culture; so to hold that moral insight is the result of ANY ONE culture is

fallacious—not only in theory, but in terms of historical fact.

That each of these estimable strictures is recognized by any sane person is testament to the fact that the moral intuitions—especially of fairness—are primally-hardwired into the brains of homo-sapiens; which accounts for the UNIVERSALITY of moral principles. It has nothing to do with the existence of this or that dogmatic system.

Hence: It's not that civil society is built on Judeo-Christian tenets; it's that THESE Judeo-Christian tenets are reflections of a moral compass that dwells in everyone—independently of the existence of Judaism, Christianity, or ANY OTHER religion.

As I show in my essay on “The Long History Of Legal Codes”: When it comes to promoting civil society, some of the earlier codes actually do a BETTER job than Mosaic law. Meanwhile, the moral system found in, say, Buddhism does not promote collective punishment NOR does it urge followers to visit the sins of the father on his descendants. As we saw earlier, Judaic lore PRESCRIBES such atrocities, on both counts.

As it turns out, the Mosaic decalogue (the terms of a fabled compact between the Hebrews and the Abrahamic deity) probably culled much of its material from ancient Greek thought—notably: the “Chrysa Epe” [“Golden Verses”] propounded by the Greek philosopher, Pythagoras of Samos in the 6th century B.C. (just as the Babylonian scribes were about to attend to the codification of Abrahamic lore during the Exilic Period). Such precepts included honoring one's oath and honoring one's parents.

Pythagoras discouraged covetous-ness and stinginess; and cautioned people against seeking luxury. He also enjoined people to “observe justice in all your actions”...while avoiding acrimony with one's fellow man. He added: “Take heart; the race of humans is divine.” In other words: The notion that we are all created in god's image did not begin with the Torah. {23}

Notably, Pythagoras stated something that is NOT found in Mosaic law: “Of all the rest of mankind, make him your friend who distinguishes himself by his *virtue*.” This may well have been the first statement against tribalism. It certainly had nothing to do with Faith in a particular deity; or with bloodlines. This statement (which urged us to judge people by the content of their character rather than by tribal affiliation; i.e. ethnicity) antedated Martin Luther King Jr.'s “I have a dream” speech by 25 centuries.

Pythagoras also admonished everyone to avoid envy, gluttony, sloth, sensuality, and anger. (All this should sound familiar.) And what rewards might one look forward to should one do all this? The Ionian philosopher concluded his verses with the promise that, after leaving one's mortal body, one would arrive in the (celestial) aether; and thereby enjoy immortality. For those who heed these guidelines, “death shall have no dominion over you.”

Pythagoras even referred to the godhead, Zeus (cum “Jupiter” in Roman mythology) as “Our Father” in the heavens; though worshipping said deity was not seen as the basis for moral conduct. It was seen as a PRAGMATIC matter whether or not one opted to appease the gods, as currying favor with them augured better fortune. Regardless of one's stead in the eyes of the gods, ethics remained ethics.

These moral themes, then, are timeless; which is to say that they are not predicated on any particular tradition. Moral principles transcend culture; which is to say that they are not contingent on any one accident of history (that is: any particular dogmatic system, which is merely a social construct). To suppose that such themes began at Mount Sinai is to countenance farce.

When considering this point, we might bear in mind that Pythagoras likely commanded the world's largest cult following in “the West” (a quasi-mystical movement based on the preachments of a prophet-like



figure) prior to the Roman Empire. So his influence surely reverberated throughout the lands in which the embryonic Christianity eventually took hold.

And what of existential matters? When it came to seeking deliverance via invocation of the divine, Pythagoras weighed in thus (referring to the “sacred nature” of the world): ***“By the healing of your soul, you will deliver it from all evil, from all affliction.”*** And how shall we mere mortals glean this vital wisdom? ***“Examine all things well. Leave yourself to always be guided by the understanding that comes from above.”*** So far as Pythagoras was concerned, it was self-discipline (seen as a “god-given” guidance) is what shall “hold the reins” of our wills. This brings to mind Kant’s profession that nothing instilled him with more awe than the starry heavens above him and the divine law within him. That spark of divinity–nay: the moral compass–is innate to our nature. In other words: It is within all of us; as it is part of our humanity.

To reiterate: These are universal themes. It is the height of conceit to suppose that any one tradition INVENTED them—for certain people at a discrete point in time. So everything that supplicants in the Abrahamic tradition extol about their own doctrines actually PRECEDED said tradition. In other words: There is nothing in the Abrahamic traditions worth lauding that did not already exist—that is: exist INDEPENDENTLY of such traditions.

We might even go further. Those who became smitten with Mosaic law during Antiquity would have been wise to heed Pythagoras’ other exhortations—as with:

- Do not ever let any man—either by his words or by his deeds—seduce you [that is: hoodwink you via wiles and charm].
- There are many kinds of reasoning—both good and bad—among men; so neither admire them nor reject them too hastily.
- Consult and deliberate before you act so that you may not commit foolish acts. For it is the mark of a miserable man to speak and act without reflection.
- Never do anything you do not understand. Learn all you ought to know; and by that means you will lead a fulfilling life.
- After having gone to bed, never allow sleep to close your eyelids until you have examined all your actions of the day by your reason.

In other words: Think for yourself. This was Immanuel Kant’s clarion call, “Sapere Aude!” It is what Thomas Paine meant when he stated that “my mind is my own church.” And—here’s the clincher—it was all articulated by a PAGAN before the (Judaic) Babylonian scribes had so much as put their first verse on parchment.

All of this is—indubitably—sage advice: Beware of con-men; be judiciously open-minded when confronted with other views; engage in critical reflection before acting; rather than being presumptuous, be perspicacious, and always double-check to see if you might be mistaken; question your own convictions. NONE of these entreaties are authoritarian in nature. NONE of it involved the weaponization of fear. NONE of it engendered delusive thinking or proffered false hope. No threats of eternal damnation were needed. There was not an iota of either tribalism or dogmatism involved.

Alas. In Judeo-Christian tradition, things are shown to be even more fatuous when it comes to epistemology. How so? Everything in Abrahamic doctrine is antithetical to autonomy in the Kantian sense. Religiosity is, after all, based on heteronomy to one degree or another. Thus it INVARIABLY involves groupthink, as well as deference to authority. This is unavoidable; as religion is institutionalized dogmatism with a tribalistic bent. In keeping with this, not a single line in either the Bible or the Koran

enjoins one to think for oneself. (Repeated exhortations to “use your reason” in the Koran a empty rhetorical flourishes.)

In the final analysis, religiosity is—at best—a flimsy prosthesis for morality; for there is nothing about piety that behooves one to engage in critical inquiry (especially when doing so is bound to bring “received wisdom” into question).

To recapitulate: Piety is not a matter of either erudition or compassion; it is sheerly a matter of compliance / conformity. The fact of the matter is that the universe operates exactly how we might expect it to if NONE of the world’s religions’ antiquated dogmas were true; and no tribe had an exalted status in the grand cosmic scheme. As it turns out, dogmatism and tribalism are inimical to probity, not prerequisites for it. {3}

Relativism is inimical to global human solidarity. Cosmopolitanism is based on a recognition of UNIVERSALS (i.e. that to which we all have access). After all, universal moral principles are not mere psychical / social constructs; they are features of Reality, and so transcend all tribal division.

In “The Theory Of Moral Sentiments” (1759), Adam Smith pointed to impartiality, not bias toward one’s own interests, as the basis for one’s participation in the demos. This entailed mutual respect between oneself (or one’s own tribe, as the case may be) and others (p. 86, 139). He championed social responsibility even as he reserved respect for individual autonomy. He recognized that each person’s internal moral compass (assuming well-honed moral intuitions) could be his guide (p. 233). In other words, freedom of conscience was symbiotic with civic-mindedness; and this is not undermined by measures taken to ensure the commonweal.

In the 1830’s, Arthur Schopenhauer formulated his own version what Karl Marx would later dub “Gattungswesen”: “Menschenliebe”, which involves—among other things—seeing oneself in all other humans. That means, Schopenhauer averred, embracing mankind as a unity, of which one is a part. The ramifications of this are profound. Schopenhauer, like Smith before him and Marx after him, envisioned a globalized compassion (via an all-encompassing sphere of empathy, made possible by the dissolution of factionalism).

As we have seen, Karl Marx of Trier {45} echoed Kant’s Categorical Imperative with his ideation of “species-being”: The man who fails to live according to species-being lives ***“in civil society where he acts simply as a private individual, treats other men as means, degrades himself to the role of a mere means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers”*** (The Marx-Engels Reader; p. 34). Clearly, Marx prized individual autonomy AND the mandate that all others be treated as sovereign beings (thus: of inherent, not merely instrumental, value).

The question arises: Do we live in a society of atomized, self-serving actors (every man for himself, devil take the hindmost) or of “citizens” (we’re all in this together)? One is a “citizen” insofar as he is an active participant in civil society, concerned with—and working toward—the public good. For Marx, even as he championed Kantian autonomy, the citizen saw himself as a member of a community (call it a “demos” or a “proletariat” or simply the rank and file), and so embraced his inter-connectedness with his fellow man. Hence: thinking for himself, but not ONLY OF himself. Kantian autonomy does not preclude civic-mindedness; it demands it. Marx referred to the condition in which “public affairs” became ***“the general affair of each individual”***; and thus indicted ***“everything...that expressed the separation of the people from community life”*** (ibid.; p. 45).

How are we to construe Marx’s attitude toward religiosity? When Marx argued against anti-Semitism

(spec. against Bruno Bauer), he wanted to make clear that he was not doing so because he was Jewish. The matter wasn't personal; nor was it tribal; it was a matter of honoring universal principles from the point of view of a human (that is, from what Schopenhauer had called the "Weltknoten" and Rawls later called the "original position"). So far as he was concerned, he would have been saying the same thing had he been any other ethnicity. Thus he indicted anti-Semitism (and Bauer in particular) from the perspective of an everyman. Marx's point was simply that the emancipation of the Jews was ultimately—like the emancipation of ANY oppressed / marginalized community—a matter of HUMAN emancipation.

When it came to species-being, the controversial point of contention (at the time; and, to some degree, to the present day) was that emancipation isn't accomplished by making it about any given religion or any given nation. It must be a universal endeavor; which is simply to say that it must have as its foundation a common ground, across all peoples. Insofar as someone deigned to undertake such an endeavor on tribalistic terms, the person was embarking on a fool's errand.

Marx implicated BOTH Judaism AND Christianity in the depredations of capitalism (hyper-consumerism, commercialism gone haywire, rent-seeking, and all the rest). Such complicity was a matter of RELIGIOSITY, not of ethnicity. (He was actually harsher toward Christians than toward his fellow Jews.) Marx was against any kind of tribalism; and so was opposed to (what is now called) identity politics. For him, a cosmopolitan approach was the best way to rid the world of bigotry—be it anti-Semitism or any other form of racism that plagued human society.

While Marx was against religionism qua tribalism, he viewed religiosity as a personal choice. The aim, then, was to relegate religiosity to the private sphere; as Faith was a matter of individual prerogative. Meanwhile, emancipation is a goal that everyone shares; so is a public matter. The point was for everyone—irrespective of ethnicity—to transcend their religious affiliations, and embody species-being. In a sense, cosmopolitanism was what would vanquish the dual dysfunctions of tribalism and socio-economic injustice; as he saw them as both stemming from a lack of species-being.

The discourse has since become somewhat muddled. Recently, right-wing expositors have come to deride cosmopolitans as "globalists" (alternately referred to as "internationalists"). What is ironic is that it is the RIGHT WING that supports the interests of trans-national corporations (as corporate power is, by definition, a right-wing phenomenon). What such polemicists seem not to understand is, in their zeal to combat some chimerical cabal (with maniacal plans to control the world), they end up supporting the very thing they decry: imperialism. As is often the case, people end up being bamboozled by their own Orwellian terminology. {46}

As discussed earlier, John Rawls captured this idea with the "original position", which puts all human beings on the same footing. (Recall that Rawls' heuristic for impartiality was a "veil of ignorance", whereby one comes to any moral issue exclusively as a human dealing with fellow humans. By doing this, all accidents of history are controlled for, and thus abstracted from.) And so it goes: One is to think of all matters strictly AS A HUMAN, not as a particular person in this or that circumstance, with this or that personal interest, or with this or that (socially-constructed) identity. {26}

Much of this has to do with maintaining consistency of (the application of) standards for everyone. "If it is permissible for me/us to do it, then it must be okay for everyone else to do it too. If it is wrong for you to do it, then it is wrong for me to do it as well." This echoes the facet of Kant's Categorical Imperative that uses the universalization of maxims as a litmus test. And it shows why tribal "Exceptionalism" and "identity politics" are morally bankrupt. {27}

So why does ANYONE succumb to cultic thinking, whereby a sanctified dogmatic system is seen as

absolute? People CRAVE (the impression of) certainty; even if it's just the illusion of certainty. Those bedazzled by sacred doctrine / texts are those who are persuaded that the only way to be sure of anything is if it was in holy writ (handed down from "on high" by an unimpeachable source). In other words, they are convinced that "truth" is simply a matter of having been written in this or that book (a topic I explore at length in "The History Of Sacred Texts").

Such beguilement is made clear by the challenge in the Koran (37:154-157, 46:4, and 68:37), wherein doubters are chided: "If what you claim is true, then produce the scriptures in which it is written!" The idea, then, is that if it is not to be found in a book, then one has no right to assert it.

Once bibliolatry takes hold, the prospect of figuring things out on one's own—and thus gleaning NEW knowledge—is not even considered. Ergo the ONLY wisdom is RECEIVED wisdom. Yet the rationalization "because [insert deified figure or holy book here] says so" is a cop-out of the highest order; not to mention a case of epistemic narcissism (wether on the level of the individual or the collective).

Yet we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge that this wonderfully straight-forward modus operandi has appeal for the simple-minded and mentally lethargic. "What's the answer to [insert pressing question here]?" Simply proclaim whatever answer that has been decreed. When justification is requested, one need only point to a specific passage in the designated tract: "Well, you see, it says HERE on page eleven..." Such dereliction of intellectual integrity—and of moral responsibility—stems from what might be called the "Refer To Page Eleven" syndrome.

As Voltaire aptly put it: Sacred scripture "is what fools have written, what imbeciles commend, what rogues teach, and young children are made to learn by heart." Indeed, "Refer To Page Elven" syndrome demonstrates how obsequiousness easily translates to fatuity. For it is no secret that such a craven approach to "wisdom" works especially well on the gormless.

As we saw earlier, those upholding Abrahamic lore as the ultimate basis for "good" and "right" have no metaphysic of morals; they have only a fanciful theology touting divine command theory—ALL of which can be boiled down to: "Because X said so."

Confusion invariably sets in once the designated tenets—whatever they might be—are couched in a narrative framework. For such tenets are invariably expressed idiomatically—leaving room for plenty of hermeneutic chicanery. Therefore it is important to distinguish between principles themselves and the idiom in which they happen to be expressed. (If one uses the idiomatic expression "god willing", it does not necessarily mean that one is positing a supernatural entity with agency—motives, sentiments, agendas—which dictates everything that happens in the world.)

Ideals are typically articulated via a compelling—and captivating—narrative vehicle, as homo sapiens are story-telling creatures. While myth can be a handy didactic tool (and sometimes even the best way for understanding certain things), myth PER SE is not required to promulgate moral principles (say, human rights)...or even to engender something as elementary as common decency. Myths are simply compelling narrative vehicles; which is why provocative caricature—or even a fantastical allegory—can serve useful pedagogic—nay, propagandistic—purposes. As any charismatic leader knows, the best way to move an otherwise complacent audience is to titillate.

But what of EVIL? It should be noted that this foreboding ideation has different incarnations. In the Manichean sense (as found in, say, Christianity and Islam), it refers to a nefarious cosmic force lurking somewhere "out there", waiting to "get us". This comes in handy when trying to account for otherwise inexplicable tragedy—plagues, famines, floods, social turmoil, etc. Why do mishaps happen, why do people

get sick, why is the land fallow, why was our side defeated in battle? Something sinister must be afoot. And we must have fallen out of favor with the god(s).

And when it comes to human behavior, it is a colloquial way of conveying a wholly human phenomenon: malice (be it perfidy, or just general ill will). More than merely heedlessly immoral (whereby one contravenes a moral principle due to carelessness or a lack of self-discipline), the colloquialism refers to a deliberate attempt to do harm to others.

“Evil” is not just a loaded buzz-term; it is a catch-all ideation. The former sense of “evil” is part of a spurious cosmogony; the latter sense of the term pertains to an eminently natural phenomenon. Both are consummate with the positing of an ostensibly objective moral foundation; but only the latter can REALLY BE based on objective grounds. For, insofar as dogmatic thinking is involved, the assessment is based on social / psychical constructs; and so is not REALLY objective. In other words: Such a claim of universality is itself dogmatic—which is to say: it is purported to be universal by fiat. The illusion of objectivity suffices when the dogmatically-inclined are searching merely for the satisfaction it confers on the believer. (The ILLUSION OF certainty is typically enough to slake the craving for certainty.)

As we’ve seen, universal principles REALLY ARE “sub specie aeternitatis” rather than products of historical accident; and so exist as they are irrespective of how we might happen to think about them, or whether or not we even acknowledge them.

Our innate capacity to intuit (universal) moral principles was first addressed by Baruch-cum-Benedict Spinoza. Since Kant’s “Groundwork For The Metaphysic Of Morals”, much work has been done on the evolutionary psychology of morality—as with Marc D. Hauser’s “Moral Minds” and Robert Wright’s “The Moral Animal”. (See also Matt Ridley’s “The Origins of Virtue” and Michael Gazzaniga’s “The Ethical Brain”).

As it turns out, morality does not depend on ANY PARTICULAR dogmatic system; or, for that matter, on ANY dogmatic system...be it a traditional religion or, say, the cult of political correct-ness. {30} To take it even further, this depends on the rejection of any and all dogmatic schema. I end here with one of Karl Marx’s more famous metaphors:

**“The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about its condition is the demand to give up a condition that needs illusions. The criticism of religion is therefore in embryo the criticism of the vale of woe, the halo of which is religion. Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chain; not so that man will wear the chain without any fantasy or consolation, but so that he will shake off the chain and cull the living flower.”**

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS:**

Friedrich Nietzsche once noted that “all religions bear traces of the fact that they arose during the intellectual immaturity of the human race.” He added that such contrivance occurred before the human race “had learned the obligations to speak the truth.” In other words: Lack of sapience was not the only problem; lack of integrity was another.

In spite of all this, religionists continue to be impelled by the most stubborn kind of wishful thinking. As I hope to have shown, religion-based “morality” is an ersatz morality. It is, at best, a prosthetic for our moral intuitions (in the same way it serves as a prosthetic for genuine spirituality).

Moreover, the universal penchants for tribalism and worshipping a deity do not have anything to do with morality per se. Something else is going on—something that has nothing to do with “Western” values...or with any particular Faith tradition.

Genuine morality is predicated on neither tribalism nor dogmatism. We do not need to read ANY sacred text to know that certain things are good and other things are bad. More to the point: That an assertion is made in this or that text is not an objective basis for that assertion. Good people do good things BECAUSE it’s the right thing to do, not because a book happened to make them aware of the fact; and certainly not because they’re following orders.

From Spinoza’s “Ethics” to Immanuel Kant’s three Critiques to Thomas Paine’s “Rights Of Man” to Derek Parfit’s “Reasons and Persons” to Peter Singer’s “Writings On An Ethical Life”, it is plain to see that the most profound moral insights have been secular. When seeking a solid foundation for morality, we are far better off reading Kant’s “Groundwork For The Metaphysic of Morals” than, well, ANY religious scripture. For the **Categorical Imperative** gives us far more insight into how an objective ethical framework exists than does a litany of decrees issued by a celestial monarch. A deontic approach to morality, not the willingness to obey the commands of this or that authority, is what we mean by rectitude.

As we’ve seen, the evolution of human society has been a matter of MOVING BEYOND sacred doctrines; as such evolution has been a matter of moving beyond institutionalized dogmatism. How could this possibly be? Universal moral principles—by definition—transcend culture; and that is precisely why they are so important. It is their UNIVERSALITY that makes them relevant for everyone, everywhere, at all times. They attain irrespective of circumstance. And they are available to all of us via our moral intuition, which inheres in the intelligent primates known as homo sapiens. {42}

In his “Human Rights As Politics And Idolatry” (p. 7), Michael Ignatieff put it well when he noted: “Human rights is the only universally available moral vernacular that validates the claims of women and children against the oppression they experience in patriarchal and tribal societies. It is the only vernacular that enables dependent persons to perceive themselves as moral agents and to act against practices...that are ratified by the weight and authority of their cultures.”

Probity has nothing to do with obeisance. Piety, then, is counterfeit probity. In the end, morality is grounded in what Marx dubbed “*gattungswesen*”, whereby we maximize our own humanity...even as we embrace our shared humanity. Such is the perspective of Thomas Paine had when he stated: “The world is my country, all mankind are my brethren, and to do good is my religion.”

## **FOOTNOTES:**

{1 This is often referred to as moral realism—a rather inane term; as morality is either real or it isn’t. (Imagine hawking the term “scientific realism”.) The idea is simple: Objective moral standards exist; which is to say that they are a feature of Reality. They are what they are independently of any given social / psychical construct. Hence I take a deontic approach to ethics, and proceed from a Kantian paradigm (which is itself predicated on an ontology / epistemology sometimes referred to as “transcendental idealism”). As outlined in the discussion of the Golden Rule, this primarily involves the Categorical Imperative.}

{2 Note that prior to the ten commandments (which were said to have been handed down to Moses on mount Sinai), there were the seven Noah-ide laws—only TWO of which dealt with morality: prohibitions of

murder and theft. The other five include dietary restrictions and a mandate to establish jurisprudence for punishing transgressors (proscriptions against fornication, idolatry, and cursing god). Between the Great Flood and Exodus, we might wonder what occurred during the intervening period to warrant an emendation of this list. One would think that such tenets were eternal.}

{3 We should recall that until the Mishnaic / Talmudic era, the primary ritual in Judaism was making sacrifices to the godhead (by burning animal carcasses on alters). Why? In order to appease him. (We even hear about how much the Abrahamic deity enjoyed the aroma of cooked flesh!) In the story of Cain's well-meaning yet inadequate sacrifice, we are reminded that piety is about placating a pathologically vindictive overlord...who had particular tastes with regard to rituals. Interestingly, when we survey religions around the world, throughout human history, we find that the perceived need to make sacrifices to appease the gods is a common theme. I explore other common leitmotifs in my essays on "Mythemes".}

{4 See my two-part essay: "The History Of Salafism". There is laughably absurd argument put forth by some of the more mendacious Judeo-Christian apologists that the slavery enjoined in the Bible is not REAL slavery (i.e. chattel slavery); but merely a kind of indentured servitude. According to this evasion, such an arrangement was entered into voluntarily—as a last resort—by those with no other options, and who were simply seeking a means of sustenance. Some apologists have gone so far as to suggest that such "servitude" was a source of DIGNITY for such people. And the owners were doing subordinates a FAVOR by enslaving them. This bit of apologetics is so loony, it's not even worthy of comment.}

{5 There are actually THREE versions of the ten "commandments" in the Torah: Exodus 20, Exodus 34, and—likely the oldest—Deuteronomy 5. Only the last is referred to as, well, the "Ten Commandments". It is typically the FIRST version that is cited when expositors surmise what those commandments might have been. As if to make matters even more befuddling, THAT version (from Exodus 20) was neither written on stone tablets NOR referred to as the "ten commandments"; and is very different from the version that IS referred to as the "ten commandments" (from Deuteronomy 5). Children "honoring" their parents seems to be a fine adjuration (under most, though not all, circumstances); but what of parents "honoring" their children? Nope. In the very next chapter (Exodus 21), we are told that parents are permitted to KILL disobedient children (ref. verse 17). We might also note that the familiar version of the decalogue precedes the chapter that condones beating one's slaves (ref. Exodus 21:20-21). And while this version of the decalogue skips the pressing issue of unleavened bread, it fixates on other frivolous matters—such as graven images and vain invocation. Hence even the earliest Judaic lore is inconsistent about what exactly Moses was supposed to have received from the Abrahamic deity (see footnote 2 above). Recall: During a temper tantrum, Moses smashed the first edition; so he needed to return up the mountain for a re-issue. One is invited to pick one's favorite version. These "ten terms" ["Aseret ha-Divrim" / "Aseret ha-Dibrot"] constituted a contractual agreement between the Hebrews (a.k.a. "Israelites") and the Abrahamic deity. The Mosaic covenant—as it came to be known—had two primary versions (Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:4-21). There were prohibitions against recognizing other deities, making idols, mixing meat and dairy, engaging in labor on the Sabbath, etc. To reiterate: The only parts that had anything to do with (genuine) morality were admonishments against cheating, stealing, lying, and killing...which, at the time, was not shocking news to ANYONE. In any case, it must be asked: What are we to think of these divine edicts? As it turns out, none of it had anything to do with universal human rights or participatory democracy; and certainly nothing that pertained to racial or gender equality. The fabled decalogue actually served to justify moral abominations like patriarchy and slavery. It is incontrovertible that Mosaic law only succeeded in impeding the development of civil society for THOUSANDS of years. As Oscar Wilde put it: "When I think of all the harm the Bible has done, I despair of ever writing anything to equal it."}

{6 Even many Scientologists are for civil rights. But we would never think to attribute that to their Scientology. Nevertheless, a Scientologist will opt to articulate even the most noble cause in different

terms than would, say, a Hmong civil rights activist. Whether Druid or Druze, one is apt to use the phrasing germane to his Faith community. (I discuss the use of idiomatic expression in conveying a gist in my essay on “America’s National Origin Myth”.) That such lingo is put in the service of a noble cause is not testament to the credence of the religious institution. Our framing of the world is always a function of the idioms that most resonate with us. This has no bearing on the verity of that which is being framed.)

{7 Heck, even the Huns invented SOMETHING useful (horseshoes). Note, by the way, that “Huns” just meant “people”. Granted, they were—indeed—rather primitive (and, yes, barbaric); yet they were STILL HUMAN. The signature Roman portrayal likely represented the first example of programatic other-ization (read: State-mandated dehumanization) in human history. Who were they? Nomadic Steppe peoples who were extremely adept at riding horses. Attila contributed approximately as much to human society as, well, any of the prophets in the Bible (almost nothing).}

{8 Regarding the medieval Silk Road, it might be noted that Sogdian merchants also participated in the thriving slave-trade across Eurasia. It is telling that the Sogdians did NOT engage in slave-trade when they predominantly subscribed to Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism (with a smattering of Buddhism and Nestorian / Syriac Christianity). It was not until they converted to Islam that they became involved in slavery. This was no coincidence.}

{9 And when Nathan (an Abrahamic prophet) rebuked David for having coveting his friend’s wife, he made no reference to a breach of any compact with the godhead. In order to make his point, he actually resorted to parable. Also note that Second Kings refers to an un-named scroll of laws that the high priest, Hilkiah, found in Solomon’s temple—with diktats that seemed to catch the king of Judah at the time (Josiah) completely off guard.}

{10 The Gospels fare a tad-bit better, but not by much. As we’ve seen, slavery continued to be endorsed. And while compassion (forbearance / magnanimity) toward one’s fellow man is encouraged (as in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke), JoN also said a few rather daffy things (as with “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery” in Matthew). The latter may have been intended to discourage husbands from a wandering eye, leaving their spouses simply for having found more enticing prospects. But it fails to address the majority of cases where divorce is prudent; thus eliding the possibility for new love thereafter. JoN also said: “As for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them: Bring them here and kill them in front of me” (Luke 19:27). Gadzooks! In Mark, he angrily curses a fig tree for not bearing any figs. In Matthew, he sends a group of demon-possessed pigs to their death. Such delectable nuggets are not exactly the most astute guidelines for moral conduct. If there were an Abrahamic deity, and JoN was indeed an incarnation thereof, it was a deity that was not attuned to some of the most obvious moral principles.}

{11 Indeed, many of those who pioneered usury happened to be devout Jews; so clearly this was not prohibited in their doctrine. In his “The Sociology of Religion”, Max Weber weighed in on this point. Historically, for the Jewish community, he noted: “The realm of economic relations with strangers, particularly economic relations prohibited in regard to fellow Jews, was an area of ethical indifference. This is, of course, the primordial economic ethics *of all peoples everywhere*. That this should have remained the Jewish economic ethic was a foregone conclusion; for even in Antiquity, the Jews almost always regarded strangers as enemies. All the well-known admonitions of the rabbis enjoining honor and faithfulness toward Gentiles could not change the impression that the religious law prohibited taking usury from fellow Jews but permitted it in transactions with non-Jews. Nor could the rabbinical counsels enjoining honesty and reliability in dealing with Gentiles alter the fact...that a lesser degree of legality was required by the law in dealing with a stranger than in dealing with another Jew (in such a matter as taking advantage of an error made by the other party). In fine, no proof is required to establish that the pariah



condition of the Jews, which we have seen resulted from the promises of Yahweh, and the resulting incessant humiliation of the Jews by Gentiles, necessarily led to the Jewish people's retaining different economic moralities for their relations with strangers and with fellow Jews" (p. 251).}

{12 The best sources for this point are Charles Freeman's "The Closing Of The Western Mind" and Catherine Nixey's "The Darkening Age".}

{13 Voltaire also averred: "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him. Let us worship god through Jesus if we must...if ignorance has so far prevailed that this name can still be spoken in all seriousness without being taken as a synonym for rapine and carnage. Every sensible man, every honorable man, is obliged to hold the Christian sect in horror."}

{14 One might say that liberal democracy is as predicated on the Judeo-Christian tradition as veganism is predicated on the meat-packing industry. And one can cull a paean to human rights from the Old and New Testaments—or from the Koran—about as readily as one can cull the laws of astro-physics from an astrology chart.}

{15 Note that when thinkers like Erasmus, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and Thomas Aquinas attempted to incorporate Aristotelian logic (and even neo-Platonism) into the Christian theological repertoire, it was IN SPITE OF Christian doctrine, not because of it. The grand total of moral and/or scientific insights for which we can thank the Roman Catholic Church: ZERO. Even those who considered themselves "Catholic" (most notably: Roger Bacon, Athanasius Kircher, Michel de Montaigne, Blais Pascal, and Gregor Mendel) did what they did in spite of, not because of, their fealty to the church. Are we expected to believe that such thinkers owe their accomplishments to PIETY? Meanwhile, when Sa'adia ben Yosef "Gaon" attempted to incorporate Greek thought into the Talmudic repertoire in the 10th century (as part of the program of Jewish "Kalam"), he was not VALIDATING Judaic dogmas; he was simply trying to reconcile them with medieval philosophy. And insofar as Maimonides contributed in any meaningful way to medieval thought, the Halakha had nothing to do with it. Insofar as men affiliated with a given Faith can be said to have made any worthwhile contributions, they did so by TRANSCENDING Abrahamic tenets, not by hewing more stringently to them. Generally, half-baked attempts to reconcile religious dogmas with science have only wound up in embarrassment for the apologist. Such desperate attempts to retro-actively square the circle only amount to special pleading.}

{16 Kai Nielsen makes this point especially well in his "Ethics Without God". The kind of exegesis that level-headed religionists insist is necessary to get their scripture to work (spec. in the way that they very much want it to work) requires a capacity we must possess independently of having availed themselves of said scripture. This effectively renders ANY scripture superfluous (that is: short of serving as a moral prosthetic). For a discussion of the utility of parable as an effective didactic tool, see my essay on parables.}

{17 That's in Deuteronomy 22:20-21. Numbers 5:11-31 prescribes a poisonous drink to any woman accused of adultery; which, we are told, will induce a miscarriage ["cause a rupture of the womb"]. Leaving aside the nuttiness of trial by ordeal, we might note that the "Kohanim" in the Torah endorsed abortion. That's right: The prerogative to abort a pregnancy is BIBLICAL.}

{18 If not, then what? Don't mix meat and dairy? No mixed fabrics? No mixed races? No foreskin allowed? What are we to think when we're notified that any work on Saturdays is impermissible (even if it's gathering kindling to make a fire for a much-needed meal for one's family)? In what we're asked to believe is the most important book ever written, prohibitions on eating shrimp cocktail made the list, yet prohibitions on slavery did not. Seems like the authors' priorities were slightly askew.}

{19 In no case was the common-man (spec. the lowly laborer) EMPOWERED by such authoritarian systems...let alone put in charge of his own destiny (or even given a say in the conditions of his labor). Indeed, these tyrannical regimes did the EXACT OPPOSITE. They were tribalistic and Reactionary to their very core—prizing highly-concentrated wealth / power and top-down control. In other words: They were the epitome of ANTI-Marxian ideals. As anyone knows who knows anything about Marx, his primary concern was eliminating systems of domination / oppression / exploitation. The lesson here is simple: Cult activity—no matter what form it takes—is detrimental to the weal of society. Marx recognized this; which is why he was so skeptical of dogmatism and tribalism (i.e. the primary facets of religion).}

{20 It's actually even worse. Adherence to the most traditional versions of the Judaic creed is positively COUNTER to such ideals. Once one gets past the theocracy, the patriarchy, the slavery, and the calls for genocide, one can try to marshal the better angels of one's nature...and use one's imagination to its full capacity. If one dims the lights, squints one's eyes and tilts one's head JUST SO, one can almost get the Judaic tradition to seem enlightened. Doing so would involve pretending that Hillel's (laudable) call for the Golden Rule encapsulates the entirety of Judaic heritage...rather than, say, animal sacrifice, the slave trade, usury, and the exhortation to not engage in labor on Saturday. (In any case, Hillel offered that already-ancient insight half a millennium AFTER the Torah was composed...even as both Confucius and Siddhartha Gautama were propounding it. For the Judeo-Christian tradition to take credit for the Golden Rule would be like Scientologists taking credit for the heliocentric model of the solar system. Yes, they accede to its veracity; but this has no bearing on the credence of Dianetics.)}

{21 It is no wonder, then, that Paine concluded: "Of all the systems of religion that ever were invented, there is no more derogatory to the Almighty, more unedifying to man, more repugnant to reason, and more contradictory to itself than this thing called Christianity. Too absurd for belief, too impossible to [be convincing], and too inconsistent for practice, it renders the heart torpid; and produces only atheists or fanatics. As an engine of power, it serves the purpose of despotism; and as a means of wealth, the avarice of priests. But so far as it respects the good of man, it leads to nothing here or hereafter."}

{22 But wait. There's a "catch". Exodus 23:9 preempts Exodus 23:31-33 with the exhortation to not oppress foreigners; as you know how it feels to be foreigners, because "you were once foreigners in Egypt" (the allegorical significance of which is worth heeding, even though it is based entirely on historical farce). In urging magnanimity, this singular entreaty seems to at least mitigate the overriding message of the Torah's slew of genocidal passages. There was also a meager articulation of the golden rule in the previous chapter (Exodus 22); as well as in Deuteronomy (10:19). The best articulation of "accepting the other" was probably in the New Testament: the parable of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke (10:25-37).}

{23 A declaration of the sanctity of ALL human life does not exist in the Hebrew Bible OR in the Koran. It is arguable that JoN was a kind of proto-humanist...though the authors of much of the New Testament most certainly were not. I discuss the genealogy of the trope "we are all made in the image of god" in my essay, "The Long History Of Legal Codes". The idea goes back to the 8th century B.C. (in the Far East). It has typically involved a worldview in which our shared divinity—and thus our shared HUMANITY—was emphasized above tribal divisions. And so it ended up in Genesis...in a fleeting passage (9:6).}

{24 What were these importune matters? Honor your elders, refrain from gathering sticks on Saturday, don't worship other deities BEFORE the Abrahamic deity, don't make pictorial representations of any idols, don't plant different kinds of seeds in the same field, and don't invoke "Yahweh" in an un-approved manner. But slavery—as well as certain kinds of genocide—is fine. If one is looking for a tract that promotes human rights, one will not find it in Abrahamic scripture. But, hey, at least we're obliged to be

nice to our parents. }

{25 Note: I discuss various societies' policies on slavery in "The History Of Legal Codes". }

{26 That we cannot achieve perfect objectivity does not preclude this exercise. That is: It does not follow from the fact that we cannot achieve COMPLETE impartiality that such an aspiration is pointless (and so should refrain from trying). Nobody can possibly be absolutely benevolent; but that doesn't preclude us from aspiring to that standard. Unattainable as it might be, we must shoot for this ideal, getting as close to it as possible; doing so with the understanding that we can never be anything more than fallible humans. }

{27 This is why "It's racist when you do it, but not when we do it" is itself a form of racism. When one refuses to apply the same standards to oneself that one applies to others (viz. a TRIBALISTIC gestalt), one is more than just a hypocrite. One is indulging in Exceptionalism (read: in-group Supremacy). To the degree that one justifies this by contending that one's own tribe X is somehow superior to all others (or uniquely entitled to something), one is an X-Supremacist. }

{28 In being against all forms of institutionalized dogmatism (read: all religions), species-being entails embracing all ethnicities (nay, all demographic groups); and doing so as a matter of course. As with Spinoza's apostasy, Marx's antipathy toward Judaism (qua ideological mindset, based on a tribalistic posture along ethnic lines) must not be confused for anti-Semitism...which is ALSO an ideological mindset based on a tribalistic posture along ethnic lines. }

{29 The solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is contained in this single insight. Whether Jew or Palestinian, Marx would enjoin all people involved in a given exchange to think of themselves first and foremost as fellow citizens of the world—as he put it: to ***"live in a universal human condition"*** with one another. (Again, this was an echo of Thomas Paine's framing.) A tribalist, Marx pointed out, considers it a god-given right to separate his own group from the rest of humanity. He is obliged to NEVER be interested in taking part in HUMAN movements; as human solidarity is inimical to his worldview. His legacy is tribally defined; therefore his destiny must be tribally defined. Consequently, he looks to a future that has nothing in common with the future of mankind as a whole. He regards himself, above all else, as a member of the anointed tribe (be it Beth Israel, the Vatican magisterium, Dar al-Islam, or anything else). Israel-Palestine is a cockamamie feud OVER LAND; but it is a dispute between tribes that are DEFINED BY religion, and—to make matter worse—concerns issues (and agendas) that are BASED ON religious beliefs. The solution, then, is to take the religion out of the equation; thereby rendering the matter solely about humans living with fellow humans. }

{30 The quintessential example here is, of course, astrology. The religious fundamentalist is just as out of touch with Reality as the person who—diligently scrutinizing a star-chart the way a shaman reads tea-leaves—laments the fact that this or that planet is in retrograde...while double-checking to ensure his spirit animal wasn't properly matched with his moon sign. After all, zodiacs are just another kind of sacred doctrine...every bit as bewitching, every bit as fatuous. }

{31 In his "The Age Of Reason", Thomas Paine expressed his concern for the sorts of things decreed by the Abrahamic deity in the Hebrew Bible: "There are matters in that book said to be done by the express command of god that are as shocking to humanity, and to every idea we have of moral justice, as any thing done by Robespierre, Carrier, and Joseph le Bon in France; by the English government in the East Indies; or by any other [murderous power] in modern times. When we read in the books ascribed to Moses, Joshua, etc., that they (the Israelites) came by stealth upon whole nations of people, who, as the history itself shows, had given them no offense; that they put all those nations to the sword; that they spared neither age nor infancy; that they utterly destroyed men, women and children; that they left not a soul to

breathe; expressions that are repeated over and over again in those books, and that too with exulting ferocity... Are we sure these things are facts? Are we sure that the Creator of man commissioned such things to be done?"}

{32 Make no mistake, even the Tengri-ist Mongols were far from perfect. The most serious problem was a belief in collective punishment—though never according to ethnicity (it was according to immediate kith, kin, and political brethren; i.e. those with demonstrable social ties who were seen as sharing moral culpability). Thus an entire family / clan may have been held liable for one member's transgressions. The idea was to engender a sense of collective responsibility; thereby—the thinking went—fostering civic-mindedness (a sense of communal honor: the only honor worth having). There was no individual honor; only honor for the group. The problem, then, was that when a contingent in a given community thwarted the Khanate, everyone was seen as culpable; and thus subject to reprisal. This explains why Genghis Khan felt obliged—in a few instances—to massacre the denizens of an entire city when it repeatedly refused to surrender. Even then, such an assault was done after extensive fair warning—many months in some cases. In a few instances (notably Nishapur and Herat c. 1221), destruction was done to set an example (to wit: in order to deter resistance by others in the future). Such cities were razed for entirely strategic reasons; never due to ethnic antipathy. Immediately after the military phase was complete, Genghis Khan's primary concern was winning over the hearts and minds of the people. (For more on this issue, see footnote 34 below.) Misconceptions about the Mongols (as unsophisticated barbarians) only began proliferating in modern times. It started with the slander propounded by (Occidental) expositors like Thomas of Spalato and Matthew Paris. For reference, I recommend the following: "The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia" by Rene Grousset, "Empires of the Silk Road" by Christopher Beckwith, "The History of The Mongol Conquests" by J.J. Saunders, and "Genghis Khan And The Making of the Modern World" by Jack Weatherford. }

{33 Marxian thought—as well as its grotesque mutation, "Marx-ism"—is an integral part of the Occidental tradition. So why, pray tell, don't those who fetishize "the West" count THAT? The "Orientalist" mindset (call it: programmatic alterity) went into overdrive during the Cold War, where the nemesis was equated with Soviet-style "communism"—which came in a variety of odious forms: from Stalinism and Maoism to Juche and the Khmer Rouge. This was done without regard for the fact that such regimes were FASCISTIC in nature; and the OPPOSITE of genuine socialism (a mischaracterization that served the simplistic narrative of "capitalism" vs. "communism"). Weirdly, this mischaracterization served BOTH sides. For U.S. oligarchs, it served as handy rhetoric for besmirching the dreaded "socialist" movement (guilt by contrived association); whereas for Soviet oligarchs, it appealed to the rank and file (for whom the quasi-Marxian rhetoric had undeniable cache). The perverse irony of it all is that each side decried the other's version of top-down control (and highly-concentrated power) by conflating DEMOCRATIC socialism with Soviet tyranny (either to discredit it or to justify it, as the case may be). This simple-minded, Manichean worldview—impelled by mutual vilification—was espoused by BOTH sides in a vicious cycle of recrimination that bolstered the ideological obduracy of each. }

{34 There are some tall-tales told of a gratuitous massacre of the city of Merv perpetrated by Tolui Khan c. 1221. However, such accounts are primarily taken from a hatchet-job: the "Tarikh-i Jahan-gusha" [History of the World Conqueror] written by a hagiographer from Khorasan known for wild exaggeration and flagrant anti-Mongolian bias: Ata-Malek of Juvayn. Evidence indicates that most of the looting of Merv would have occurred toward the end of the 13th century by Kaidu Khan of the Chagatai Khanate (via Ogedei). There are also horrifying—though highly dubious—tales of massacres at Nishapur and Herat (also c. 1221). For similar reasons, those accounts must be taken with a hefty grain of salt. The razing of [Old] Urgench (also in 1221) was perpetrated by Genghis Khan's (insolent) sons: Jochi and Chagatai...who resorted to drastic measures (including: flooding the entire city) after six grueling months of fighting. In no

case was killing due to a campaign of ethnic cleansing.}

{35 By the mid-17th century, the Enlightenment was gathering steam. In the wake of the critical essays of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, René Descartes' bold forays into rationalism, and Nicolas Copernicus' ground-breaking "The Harmony of the World", the stage was set for a major sea-change. Francis Bacon wrote a landmark disquisition on the scientific method in 1620: "Novum Organum". Robert Boyle published "The Skeptical Chymist" in 1661. And starting in 1665, the world's first scientific journal was published in England: the "Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society". None of it had anything to do with sacred doctrine. In fact, every word of it amounted to a repudiation of "received wisdom".}

{36 Even the United States can't seem to get something as fundamental as "free speech" right. To the present day, many citizens AND OFFICIALS persist in proscribing politically incorrect things like flag-burning; while mandating (in signature fascist fashion) that everyone stand at attention during the national anthem...as if they were hewing to Juche in North Korea. And in most states, sympathizers of Revisionist Zionism have managed to enact anti-B.D.S. legislation...in flagrant contravention of the Constitution's First Amendment (explicitly guaranteeing the freedom of speech / protest). This is a stark reminder that, as I write this essay, fascist strains linger in the self-proclaimed "freest country in the world". Meanwhile, many Americans STILL can't seem to apprehend the simple principle, "separation of Church and State" (insisting that public funds be used to facilitate religious observance; and that religious operations be exempt from standard taxation). Incredibly, there exists even more misunderstanding when it comes to the SECOND Amendment (a topic I explore at length in my essay about its incontrovertible obsolescence).}

{37 Note that this is not to be confused with the reprobate movement known as "post-modernism"; which was every bit as delusive as the psychical / social constructs it sought to debunk (as it was based upon absolutist moral / cultural relativism.) THAT ironically became its own religion—replete with catechism and sanctified dogmatic edifice (namely: that everything under the sun was—and could only ever be—a psychical / social construct). This involved its own anti-science bias: an absolutist treatment of behaviorism and rejection of evolutionary psychology.}

{38 In general terms: Justifying X by recourse to X is, of course, question-begging. For any given system (X), an analysis of X must be done from a meta-X standpoint. Consequently, one is obliged to assess X according to standards that exist independently of X.}

{39 Think of someone who constantly found the need to announce, "I am brilliant! I am filled with compassion! And don't you forget it!" What would this say about such a person? Hint: He is most likely NOT brilliant OR compassionate. (After all, actions speak louder than words.) Yet we hear some version of: "Remember me. Pay tribute to me. Be grateful to me; and don't deny me." Does this sound like an unfathomably wise super-being? 2:152 in the Koran puts these words into the mouth of the alleged Creator of the Universe; thereby making him seem like a spoiled debutant (or an ornery diva, depending on the tone one ascribes to the pronouncement). In the Koran, the reader is expected to believe that this navel-gazing deity is wonderful because he repeatedly PROCLAIMS that he is wonderful.}

{40 Does this sound like the "frame of mind" of a divine entity? Suffice to say, it is rather peculiar for a super-being to create creatures only to say to them: "Pay tribute to me. Pay homage to me. Revere me. Kneel before me. Tell me how great I am! THAT is the only reason you exist." In effect, the protagonist of the Koran says of mankind: "I created them so that they would submit to me and routinely remind me that I'm awesome. I will reward those who play along; and punish those who don't oblige me." Super-beings, it would seem, would be above such demands.}

{41 Apparently, the Creator Of The Universe expects us to spend our lives GROVELING. That is to say:

He would have us tripping over ourselves to appease him. We lowly humans need to constantly remind this cosmic overlord how great he is—and must do so for OUR OWN good, not for his gratification. But why is this? Because, we are told, in order to TRULY appreciate him, we need to constantly remind OURSELVES, several times daily. And what better way than to demonstrate our fealty to him in overt (ritualistic) ways? Of course, this makes no sense (lest we suppose this super-being subscribes to some high-octane version of neuro-linguistic programming; and assumes we are all suffering from a daily bout of senility). To fully appreciate X, we hardly need to incessantly re-assert X’s virtues day in and day out. }

{42 For more on this topic, see Susan Jacoby’s “Freethinkers” and Charles Freeman’s “The Closing Of The Western Mind”.}

{43 Meanwhile, Occident-fetishists decry a bogeyman dubbed “Cultural Marxism”. This term of disparagement is nonsensical; as a Marxian critique is an economic critique. Such ideals have nothing to do with moral relativism, “identity politics”, or any of the other hobgoblins that right-wing polemicists associate with the nefarious “Left”. As an epithet, “cultural Marxism” attempts to tie Marxian ideas (which are democratic) to illiberalism (which is fascistic); caricaturing social democracy as a gateway to a politburo...thereby putting us all on a path that leads to the gulag. Such blathering is so bonkers, it’s enough to take one’s breath away. This queer locution has a telling genealogy. It actually began as “cultural Bolshevism”: a term used in Nazi propaganda to slander Germany’s (actual) socialists. We might bear in mind that the quintessential anti-totalitarian writer of the 20th century, George Orwell, was a socialist; which tells us much of what one might want to know about those who attempt to link Marxian thought with tyrannical regimes. For more on misapprehensions of Marx, see Appendix 4 of my essay, “The Long History of Legal Codes”.}

{44 When the Babylonian scribes penned the Torah during the Exilic period, the notion of being made in god’s image (as crudely expressed in Genesis 9:6) was nothing new. This tenet had been articulated far more eloquently in the Vedic tradition, via the principle of “purusavada”. The idea that we are all “one with the divine” (that each of us has inherent value) was expressed in the four “Maha-vakyas” (core mantras). **First:** “Prajna[nam] Brahma[n]” (insight is predicated on the universal consciousness). **Second:** “Ayam Atma[n] Brahma[n]” (each self is part of the universal consciousness). **Third:** “Aham Brahma Asmi” (I am part of the universal consciousness). **Fourth:** “Tat [alt. Sat] Tvam Asi” (all of existence is embodied in you). In the 6th century B.C., Pythagoras of Samos articulated the idea in his “Chrysa Epe” [“Golden Verses”], in which he implored: “Take heart; all of mankind is divinity.” Later, the Roman philosopher, Cicero posited the “divina mens” (divine mind) that pervaded all humanity. In this view, mankind was guided by the “numen” (divine will).}

{45 The disjunctive genealogy of Marx’s surname is based on his father’s name-change. He went from Heschel ben Mordec[h]ai to Heinrich Marx (though he often went by “Henry”). It was not uncommon for European Jews to alter their names at the time. Karl’s paternal grandfather, Mordec[h]ai ha-Levi was the chief rabbi of Trier; and it’s anyone’s guess the circumstances with which Henry was forced to contend as he came of age—as a Rhineland Jew—in the late 18th century.}

{46 Regrettably, the association of Jews with fiduciary mendacity was—and continues to be—a common trope in anti-Semitic circles; but this was—and still is—beside the point. When Jews engage in financial malfeasance, it’s STILL wrong. Avarice is avarice, irrespective of the perpetrator. Exempting someone from moral judgement simply because he / she happens to be Jewish is absurd. The key is to not base the indictment on ethnicity. To accuse someone of anti-Semitism simply because the object of their indictment happens to be Jewish is downright perfidious.}

## **APPENDIX:**

When it comes to progress, a hidebound commitment to conventional thinking typically hamstrings our ability to consider revolutionary new ways of doing things. Seeing as how we are creatures of habit, and considering the formidable power of memetic inertia, conventional thinking tends to only dissipate over time. It is worth recalling the sage words of Thomas Paine in “Common Sense”: “Perhaps the sentiments contained in the following pages are not YET sufficiently fashionable to procure them general favor. A long habit of not thinking a thing WRONG gives it a superficial appearance of being RIGHT, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defense of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason.”

But what of reputedly “secular” tyranny? As with North Korea’s “Juche” (in present-day North Korea), movements like Stalinism and Maoism (cults of personality in the context of Soviet-style “communism”) are—erroneously—held up as exemplars of secularity. This is not only false; it is the opposite of the case. In each of these regimes, the most virulent cult activity was operative. They serve as a reminder that cult activity flourishes in illiberal environs; and so is bound to thrive in the midst of a despotic reign (see my essay: “The Different Faces Of Fascism”).

A regime of highly-concentrated power and top-down control (as well as a mechanism for groupthink and the promulgation of some repertoire of dogmas) fuels the cultic pathos. With a program of systematically-enforced compliance / conformity already in place, a society is primed for religious fundamentalism—be it a traditional religion or a novel one. Juche, Stalinism, and Maoism are illustrative. Though the “religion” of such regimes was not of the conventional sort (their objects of deification were not celestial entities), they were effectively totalitarian theocracies. (Stalin believed in a god; its name was Stalin. Mao believed in a god; its name was Mao. And “Choson” STILL DO believe in a god; its name is Il-Sung of the Kim family.)

In each case, it is important to recognize WHY and HOW such regimes were iniquitous. Certain features made them antithetical to civil society; and thus devastating to the commonweal. As it turns out, those features are hallmarks of cult activity.

Some religious apologists are tempted to conclude from these 20th-century outrages: “SEE? Look what happens when people aren’t sufficiently religious [viz. the Abrahamic Faith]!” The conclusion they draw is equally daft: “We should therefore embrace some combination of OUR OWN (Judeo-Christian) fundamentalism; and—in doing so—espouse what we see as the antithesis of absolutist socialism: anarcho-capitalism.” This completely miss the point. It’s as if one were to consider the horrors of the Khmer Rouge and conclude: “If only Pol Pot had been more religious!”

As it turns out, neither tribalism nor institutionalized dogmatism play any role in the creation of civil society. Universal principles categorically transcend any/all culture; as they are not social constructs. That is: They are “sub specie aeternitatis”, not products of historical accident; which means that they are not subject to social forces in the way that social / psychical constructs are.

As discussed, such universals are accessible to us via what John Rawls dubbed “reflective equilibrium”: a process by which all reasonable people deliberate in an honest forum; and—as disinterested interlocutors—eventually converge on a verdict. Such consensus is inevitable so long as everyone is being REASONABLE. The key is for interlocutors to not be addled with bias. Rawls proposed that any vested interests can be nullified from an “original position” by assessing socio-economic policy through a “veil of ignorance” (of one’s own socio-economic status).

I explore this matter further in my essay on “The Long History Of Legal Codes”.

## **Postscript:**

### **More On Occident-Fetishism**

It is worth elaborating on my critique of the oft-invoked locution, “The West”. While Edward Said proffered a well-known indictment of what he called “Orientalism”, there are other points worth making on this matter.

Let’s start with some simple observations. The so-called “West” gave us Mozart, Marx, and penicillin, but it also gave us post-modernism, Scientology, and car alarms. How are we to assess this track-record? Indeed, the so-called “West” may have given us Parisian salons, but it also gave us Rodeo Drive. Some within the Occident may have propelled the Enlightenment, but others pioneered Reality TV. They may have created computer technology, but they also created Twitter.

Of course, EVERY culture is a mixture of good and bad. China gave us the timeless spiritual insights of Lao Tzu, but it also gave us the blundering idiocy of Mao Tse Tung. So it has gone with Europe. Russia gave us Pushkin, but it also gave us Putin. France gave us Voltaire, but it also gave us Robespierre. (Diderot compiled an encyclopedia, but Jacques Lacan churned out fashionable nonsense.) Germany gave us Brahms, but it also gave us Himmler. Spain gave us flamenco dancing, but it also gave us Torquemada. England gave us the Magna Carta, but it also gave us marmite.

Ascribing everything desirable within a designated geographic area to a singular legacy—while attributing any dysfunction to those arrayed against that legacy—is a fatuous enterprise. Such a vast area—from California to Prussia—is invariably comprised of a patchwork of variegated cultures, impinging upon one another in haphazard ways. So it bears worth remembering: While the so-called “West” brought us Copernicus, Mendelssohn, and french fries; it also brought us fascism, hedge funds, and Facebook.

As for tracing “Western” philosophy back to ancient Greece, we might consider the tactics employed. In order to make their claims seem plausible, proponents of the (chimerical) Plato-to-NATO pipeline require that we disregard the Stoics...and Spinoza...and Hume...and Rousseau...and Thomas Paine. Such a dubious caricature of world history requires use to indulge in a litany of non sequiturs and gross generalizations.

Contrary to the claims of those who fetishize the Occident, the so-called “West” progressed insofar as it DIVORCED itself from Judeo-Christian tenets (read: dogmatism, tribalism, and theocracy) and embraced secularity (read: science, humanism, and political liberalism). For every advance made, Mosaic law had nothing to do with it. (Shall we supposed that refraining from making graven images, mixing meat with dairy, and working on weekends somehow abetted societal progress?) Once we consider the tenets that were NOT unique to Mosaic law, we find that the Decalogue is—and always has been—utterly superfluous.

In reality, over the past two millennia, progress was stymied by religiosity at every pivotal juncture. (Retort: If only more people engaged in daily prayer, society may have evolved faster!) The specious locution, “Judeo-Christian values” (as with its more recent cousin, “family values”) has typically served as a euphemism for imperialism, reactionary thinking, and ethno-centricity. Those espousing such values have fought science every step of the way, from Galileo to Darwin—be it the mitigation of climate change or the support for the lives of “unborn children”. “Judeo-Christian values” didn’t give us feminism; it gave



us misogyny. It didn't give us critical thinking; it gave us Messianic fervor.

According to those who exalt "Judeo-Christian values", a better world awaits...if only people stopped taking the Abrahamic deity's name in vain, abortion was criminalized, and we took the Book of Revelation more seriously. So far as they're concerned, we can draw a direct line from the Torah to the Declaration of Independence; and the way forward is to continue on that sublime path...though, presumably, without all the racism and slavery. (Never mind the genocides.) If it was good enough for the Iron Age, it's good enough for the 21st century.

So we are asked to believe the history of "Western civilization" was an epic journey from Sinai to Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (It meandered through Jerusalem and Athens before winding up on the shores of the Potomac.) The result: DEMOCRACY. To make this tall-tale seem remotely plausible, we are forced to disregard the fact that how democratic countries are is—invariably—inversely proportional to how religious they are. The pattern is so consistent, it requires a concerted effort to not notice it.

It is worth noting that there is something duplicitous about the rather cloying vernacular one is forced to use to make all this seem plausible. When polemicists prattle on about "Judeo-Christian values", they are almost always describing Christian values, yet want to pretend they are being inclusive of Jews. (The same goes for the unctuous paeans to Israel by Christian Zionists.) What would this hybridized canon of values even entail? Kosher dietary constraints? Honoring the Sabbath? (Such things are too Judaic; so that doesn't work for right-wing Gentiles.) Well, then what? Persecution for heresy? Blasphemy laws? (Such things are overtly theocratic. So perhaps not.)

What, then, might the proponents of such values have in mind. Certainly not what Jesus of Nazareth enjoined—notably: living one's life as if in a socialist commune (thus refraining from rent-seeking, usury, materialistic pursuits, and hoarding). On the contrary, those touting "Judeo-Christian values" routinely embrace avarice; so tend to push for unbridled capitalism (every man for himself; devil take the hindmost), no matter how plutocratic things might become as a result.

What about separation of church and state? Or forbearance? Or universal empathy? Nope. Nope. And nope. We soon find that "Judeo-Christian" is an empty catch-phrase, often deployed in pursuit of a perfidious agenda under the auspices of estimable goals (e.g. "individual liberty"). This esteemed program may do nothing to promote civil rights, or universal healthcare, or cosmopolitan ideals; but, to the untutored ear, it SOUNDS quite lovely. According to this hyper-romantized portrayal of the so-called "West", the Occident has a monopoly on sugar and spice and everything nice; and any injustice that occurs is—by definition—NON-Western in nature. Oligarchy, corruption, oppression, exploitation? Those aren't WESTERN traits, we're told; and when they occur in Occidental precincts, it must be IN SPITE of the Occident's gilded legacy.

But there are glitches in this just-so story. Christianity did not bring us Kant's "Critique Of Pure Reason" or Paine's "The Rights Of Man". Rather, it brought us demented lamentations like Oswald Spengler's "The Decline Of The West" and James Burnham's "Suicide Of The West". While Thomas Aquinas may have introduced Aristotle to Christendom, we don't have the catechism of the Roman Catholic Church to thank for the gesture. It was his heterodoxy that moved him.

In hewing to ancient creeds, we didn't get major medical advances or human rights or micro-chips or even balanced diets. Instead we got deranged prognostications like Hal Lindsey's "The Late, Great Planet Earth" and political movements like "The Moral Majority". It's no surprise that the same country that gave us Martin Luther King Jr. gave us Donald Trump. This is not exactly a stellar record. Yet the way

Occident-fetishists tell it, if only more people hewed to scripture, and allowed the “free market” to run its course, civilization would have had iPhones, CT scans, and the Cheesecake Factory by the Middle Ages.

Ironically, in popularizing the trope, “western civilization”, Oswald Spengler (begrudgingly) predicted its demise. His analysis was characterized by over-simplification, and was riddled with false dichotomies. It caught on nevertheless, as we homo sapiens are suckers for a good story. And Spengler offered a compelling narrative—casting all human affairs as some kind of grand Manichean struggle. The paradigm holds undeniable appeal because it is poignant and simple-minded.

We are thus furnished with a puerile, binary worldview. It is us (the good guys) pitted against them (the bad guys)...fighting for, respectively, a Galt’s Gulch of unbridled capitalism vs. a communist tyranny festooned with gulags. The former alternative is depicted in cartoonish terms (an equitable, perfectly meritocratic marketplace populated by well-behaved Jews and Christians); while the latter is depicted in sinister ways (a hell-scape over-run by Stalinists / Maoists, Islamic jihadists, intellectual elitists, and legions of godless, purple-haired vegans). Presumably, the former looks like an episode of *Leave It To Beaver*, while the latter looks nothing like Denmark.

So what is THE WEST? It’s everything and nothing. Whatever it is, it has been a very mixed bag. Nobody likes a checkered record; but if we count Chopin’s nocturnes and the Sistine Chapel, we also need to also count televangelism and QVC. If we count Athenian democracy, we also need to count the Ku Klux Klan. There are Quakers, but there are also Pentecostals. If we praise Da Vinci for his designs and Bach for his fugues, we are forced to also acknowledge the Watchtower Society and the Church Of Latter-Day Saints.

The conclusion is clear: The sooner the so-called “West” jettisons its Judeo-Christian legacy, the better. And the sooner it stops fashioning itself as the vaunted “West”, the sooner it can recognize that we live in a global society; and that we are ALL a work in progress.