The Island



“Faith sees best while in the dark.” –Soren Kierkegaard

“We have fed the heart on fantasies / The heart has grown brutal from the fare.” –William Butler Yeats

“People don’t know what they want until you show it to them.” –Steve Jobs

Two of the most powerful motivating factors of human thinking / behavior are hope and fear. Manipulate either—or both—of those two things, and one will have legions of sycophants eating out of the palm of one’s hand. This is what demagogues do; and it is how most religions work. (After all, most demagogues are effectively cult leaders—a matter I discuss in my essays, “The History Of Exalted Figures” and “The Long History Of Sacred Texts”.)

Other than serving as an explanatory device, religion serves as an incentive structure. While religion provides participants with a map of meaning to help them navigate the beguiling—and often bewildering—world in which they find themselves; and, in doing so, it furnishes them with the tools to make sense of everything.

In short: Religion gives participants a sense of purpose; something to live for. Christianity and Islam do this most decisively, as they present a binary choice: two starkly contrasted destinations in the hereafter. Consequently, participants find themselves longing to gain access to a celestial paradise…even as they are terrified of being consigned to hellfire. Hope and fear: each of them based on a consideration of how things will turn out for oneself in an imagined afterlife. What else are promises of salvation and threats of damnation than a way to manage people's lives? Here, we focus on the carrot ("the Island"); and in "Nemesis", I focus on the stick.

So far as Christianity and Islam are concerned, this importune alternative is presented as a matter of PIETY—that is: whether one appeases or defies the godhead. And how one goes about appeasing / defying the cosmic overlord is a function of OBEISANCE—that is: conformity to prescribed norms; compliance with the diktats of worldly institutions.

Such schema is staggeringly effective, as it resonates with us on a primal level. That's why Emanuel Swedenborg's "Of Heaven And Its Wonders, And Of Hell" made so many waves when it was published in 1758. The book addressed the two alternatives: afterlives in heaven or hell…just as had Catholics like Dante, Petrarch, and Pedro Calderon de la Barca had done during the Italian Renaissance. In his "The Great Theater Of The World" and "Life Is A Dream", Calderon held that insofar as one makes life entirely about an AFTER-life, our worldly existence is merely a test; or even just a phantasm. Life, then, is all about the destination; and it doesn't have any point beyond that. The implications of this: the world is but a staging ground; and the sine qua non is earning admission into a luxury-resort-in-the-sky for an eternal membership. It's not exactly an eternal Walpurgis Night on the Brocken in the Harz mountains; but it is—effectively—a celestial bordello, equipped with fine dining and plenty of shade. Super-terrestrial delights are quite enticing for horny, young men enduring the sweltering heat of the desert sun.

But then again, this is nothing peculiar; it reflects some of the most elementary aspects of our universal human nature. While enduring the trials and tribulations of our worldly existence (a.k.a. the human condition), it is only natural that we all

yearn for a Shangri La—typically rendered as some Edenic venue with lots of flowers, rainbows, gumdrop trees, verdant meadows, majestic waterfalls, placid lagoons of pink lemonade, and rivers of milk and honey…plus lots of hot, naked chicks frolicking around some sort of lagoon. Oh, and lots of scrumptious food.

Different people handle this reverie in different ways; as they seek this fantastical destination in different places; consider different ways of getting there; and even have different expectations / hopes for what it might entail. Where we look for it and how we conceptualize it dictates what sorts of things appeal to us.

Once we find ourselves in the desired afterlife destination, the question goes from "What do we need to do to get into heaven?" to "What do we do now that we're here?" Imagine devoting extensive time and energy to gaining access into an ultra-exclusive nightclub; and once one is finally inside, wondering: "Ok, now what?" After the initial rush, one is sure to experience some sort of denouement.

As they lounge on well-upholstered couches, sipping some delicious libation and nibbling on the grapes served by buxom angelic concubines, denizens of the celestial paradise will invariably find themselves wondering: "Are we to now just sit around, savoring euphoria every minute of every hour of every day for the rest of eternity?" After having copulated with a "houri" for the ten-thousandth time, the novelty might start to wear off; and the titillation would surely wane. The fantastical would eventually become rather mundane.

The result is not as advertised. This realization would soon strike us as we transition from one mode (having a point to our existence) to another (having an utterly pointless existence). If heaven is, indeed, chronic euphoria; then we would find ourselves in a rather tedious condition: an existence with no aspiration; just unmitigated satisfaction. (Eternal bliss, it seems, is rather over-rated.) But such concerns usually do not pose a problem. Consider the first Mohammedans. The carrot worked quite well with wayward Bedouins pining for pussy and glory; so the inducement served its purpose. 14 centuries later, it continues to have purchase. Islamic apologist, Mark Hanson (a.k.a. "Hamza Yusuf") has openly admitted that, pursuant to a near-death experience at 17 years old, he surveyed the various religious options, and chose Islam due to the fact that it offered the most enticing afterlife. Like many, he was clearly pursuing the juiciest carrots (and may have also been influenced by the most menacing sticks). He was right. Islam offers the most graphic description of both: the most prurient salvation and most lurid damnation—each of which is likely to be persuasive to the adolescent mind.

The details proffered by Islamic scripture about “jannah” are comically overwrought; but for horny, young men, it’s just what the doctor ordered. It comes as no surprise that the teenage Mark Hanson—as with tens of millions of other male youth around the world—was mesmerized by the lotusland on offer in the Koran. This makes sense; as the Paradise hawked in the “Final Revelation” were DESIGNED to captivate horny, young men who covet an endless supply of milk and honey that they can enjoy while reclining on plush sofas under shaded pavillions. Having a coterie of buxom angelic concubines at their beck and call didn’t hurt either.

Our perpetual hankering for escapism inclines us to “take the leap” in cases where there is an extremely alluring outcome: “Wonderful things are in store for me; as well as for my kith and kin.” Such prospects can be quite compelling; so credence is rather beside the point. People rarely think about the logistics when they are transfixed—nay, hypnotized—by the beguiling visions on offer. This is especially so when people are desperate for hope—no matter how false that hope might be. When life is trying, the reassurance that “it will all be worth it in the end” is hard to resist.

Alas. Such illusions disintegrate upon scrutiny; especially when logistics are taken into account. For example, if either Christians or Muslims are correct about heaven, we’re looking at a venue populated by HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS of lucky souls. In the case of Islamic theology, where scripture is highly specific in its descriptions of the venue, we’re looking at a massive network of shaded pavilions—furnished with well-upholstered couches—capable of accommodating well over a BILLION people (assuming all devout Muslims are admitted into Paradise). The ancient Norse seemed to be under the impression that brave warriors would feast in a great hall: Valhalla. But exactly how gigantic would this dining establishment need to be? And what was there to do between meals?

By indulging in these flights of fancy, we wind up engulfed in a crucible of swirling absurdities. Yet True Believers are too entranced to bring their critical faculties to bear. The ensuing intoxication is taken as a validation of their musings.

It is no secret that people can be manipulated / exploited. History has shown us that integral to manipulating / exploiting people is ensuring they are (blissfully) unaware that they are being manipulated / exploited. It is commonly supposed that this must involve devious machinations of some sort–whether by an overtly dastardly villain or by a sinister cabal that operates in the shadows. But this is a mistake; as it is a crude caricature of how things usually occur. Subterfuge needn’t be the ambit of

odious parties of the sort we find in comic books, triller novels, and fairy tales–where the nemesis takes on palpably monstrous incarnations for the sake of titillating dramatization. As Hannah Arendt noted, “evil” is most insidious in its more banal forms.

Those in power often instill a sense of buoyant expectancy in the masses as a way to ingratiate themselves with the rank-and file…and thus in order manipulate them. This stratagem accounts for the prevalence of promised rewards in most theologies. The key is that the best way to control people is to convince them they are not being controlled; and–by the same token–the best way to exploit people is to distract them from the fact that they are being exploited. (In social media terms, people are under the impression that they are using Facebook even as Facebook is actually **using them**.)

A metaphor for this existential heist can be found in the 2005 film, “The Island”. The idea is presented in a straight-forward manner: “Just keep your head down, do as you’re told, and YOU TOO might someday be chosen for…THE ISLAND.” This captivating narrative serves as an apt illustration of the social architecture of false hope. {1}

There is a caveat that bolsters the anticipation of the Promised Land: “If your life sucks, don’t sweat it. Because, gosh darn it, it’s eventually gonna be FANTASTIC. Just hang in there; and follow these instructions. TRUST us. We have your best interests at heart.” The “it’ll all be worthwhile in the end” schtick can be stupendously successful when people are in dire straights, and desperately need a reason to persevere in the face of tribulation.

The moral of the story: “Stay in line, and all will be will. But get out of line, and you may forfeit your chances to win the ultimate prize.” This should sound familiar–as it is how strict disciplinarians ensure children remain well-behaved. In this Pavlovian scheme, the oft-advertised Paradise serves as an irresistible carrot…or, that is, the PROMISE OF a carrot, which will be given only once…and at some unspecified time in the future.

Such is the nature of false hope. The prospects needn’t be real; it is the ILLUSION OF hope that does all the work. It is the BELIEF IN a fata morgana awaiting those who toe the line that behooves people to toe the line. “The Island” illustrates how this works quite well. For the willing captives (who–it is crucial to understand–saw themselves as protectees), the carrot was an island paradise–replete with sun, surf,

and carefree living. As it turned out, there was no more potent a ruse for ensuring they remained compliant; as their entire lives amounted to a mundane existence of a highly-regimented daily routine. Their lives were strictly choreographed “for their own good”, all while being cooped up in an underground compound (seen as a kind of holding place until they would finally–at long last–be delivered to the longed-for destination). For the denizens of this subterranean North Korea, the idea of a tropical island under a blue sky, with pristine beaches and sublime sunsets, was exactly what the doctor ordered.

In other religions, the carrot may be an open-air seraglio in a lush garden, replete with splendorous raiments, a delicious buffet, and an unending orgy with a coterie of angelic concubines (see my essay on “The Brief History Of Heaven And Hell”).

Spoiler alert: The Island doesn’t really exist.

The name of the game is to keep everyone’s hopes alive. Nobody wants to bungle their chance to be admitted to the magnificent hereafter (“akhira” in Arabic)… where, they’re assured, they’ll get to see their (departed) loved ones once more. (Gee-wiz!) “Just hang in there. This worldly life (“duniya” in Arabic), trying as it may often be, is only temporary. It’ll all be worth it…if, that is, you play your cards right.” The result of this elaborate charade is a population of groveling supplicants waiting for their celestial Godot (see my essay, “Brink Porn”).

Tragically, this devious scam works like a charm. It is testament to one of the simplest and most effective Machiavellian ploys ever devised: Distract the rabble with something mesmerizing, and they’ll be putty in your hands. As was shown in “The Island”, when this boondoggle is well-orchestrated, one can corral a pliant flock in whatever way one wishes.

Even more staggering is the possibility of sustaining the illusion of free will. If one can control what people want, then one doesn’t have to MAKE them do anything. They will eagerly do as one wishes; and FEEL as though they have made their own decision. This is what makes scams to dangerous: a faux sense of empowerment even as one is being demeaned / exploited. {16}

Those who have even a rudimentary understanding of con-artistry can see through such smokescreens rather easily. Yet therein lies the rub: In order to even TRY to see through a smokescreen, one must recognize that the smokescreen exists. (Illusions don’t readily announce themselves as illusions; lest they not be effective AS illusions.) After all, much of the point of the facade is to ensure the facade does

not appear to be obfuscating anything. Pretense only works when it isn't seen as pretense. (And as any cosmetologist will attest, the most tactful application of makeup makes it look as though one is NOT WEARING makeup.)

The allure of an illusory freedom (the Koranic "horriya") is elementary. It constitutes freedom from want, from confusion, from disorganization, from uncertainty, and from unpredictability. In the film, "The Island", everyone is fed very well, and has a comfy place to sleep each night…all while in holding. There is no insecurity; only calm anticipation. For this ruse to work, structure is paramount. The ruse is that the governing corporation is "protecting" the residents from the farcical evil the corporation itself concocted. This is reminiscent of god's statement in the Koran that he will provide refuge from the evil of that which he himself created: the ordeal that is worldly life ("duniya"; ref. the opening of Surah 113). Shaded pavilions as reprieve from the scorching heat; sumptuous feast to satiate hunger; plenty of wine with no hangovers to quench any thirst (while presumably offering a pleasant buzz); and–of course–plenty of fucking.

The anticipation of eternal bliss is enough to get people through the day…and help them sleep at night. We might recall the tragically-deluded members of the People's Temple. Unfortunately, the case studies of this duplicitous motif are numerous: Haredim, Evangelical Christians, Salafis, Mormons, Branch Davidians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientologists, etc. As far as supplicants are concerned, "We're here of our own free will. All is well. We're taken care of and don't have to worry." And what of the top-down control? "The powers-that-be have our best interests at heart. Their unimpeachable authority is for our own good." In each case, the captives perceived their candy-coated prison as their Argo to salvation. The message is loud and clear: Better days lie ahead, just be patient. (And don't get out of line.) {17}

In this duplicitous scheme, the message from the powers-that-be is: "Do as we say, and everything will turn out well. Just hang in there; stick with the program…and things will eventually pan out." A sense of urgency can be inculcated with the perpetual assurance that "salvation is just around the corner" (see my essay on "Brink Porn"). With this being incessantly drummed into supplicants' heads, they will eagerly acquiesce to the imposed regimen–no matter how draconian. (Sometimes, the more draconian, the better; as compliance signals fealty.)

As it happens in the real world, “the Island” takes many forms. It can be “the American Dream” or what Liu Mingfu called “the Chinese Dream”–either way: a socio-economic hoax. {11} It can be a right-wing libertarian utopia (think of Ayn Rand’s “Galt’s Gulch”). Or it might just be a vision of fame and fortune–as with the countless get-rich-quick schemes hawked in late-night info-mercials. The key is to provide tantalizing imagery–to SHOW what it’s like for those who have purportedly “made it”. The message is always the same: “This too could someday be YOU. Imagine!”

Much of world’s sanctified folklore has offered its own version of “the Island”. Throughout history, theologies have proffered their own info-mercials–dating back to the Sumerian tales of the garden-paradise, “Dilmun”. In Late Antiquity, Augustine of Hippo posited the “City of God”: his own take on the Hebrew “Yahweh-shammah” [“Where God Dwells”], which was often equated with Zion / Jerusalem. This was essentially what came to be viewed as “Kingdom Come” (alt. Kingdom of Heaven; Kingdom of God). {3}

The common thread is a utopian destination–typically in the form of a verdant (celestial) garden, where there are no worries, no suffering, and an endless supply of euphoria. It is usually located in an otherworldly place (accessible only to a chosen few). Members of the Heaven’s Gate cult were convinced that, in dying, they would be magically transported to the “Next Level” via alien spacecraft. (THEIR path to “akhira”, they believed, awaited them behind comet Hale-Bopp.) Indeed, it was the eager anticipation for ascending to the “Next Level” that impelled them to take their own lives. Such a leitmotif is captivating, which is why it crops up in so much fiction:

- In James Hilton’s **“Lost Horizon”** (1933), it was **“Shangri-La”**
- In the Disney film, **“Pinocchio”** (1940), it was **“Pleasure Island”**
- In George Orwell’s **“Animal Farm”** (1944), it was **“Sugarcandy Mountain”**
- In William F. Nolan’s **“Logan’s Run”** (1967), salvation was delivered in the form of **“Renewal”**
- In Lois Lowry’s **“The Giver”** (1993), it was **“Elsewhere”**
- In the Brasilian series **“3%”** (2016), it was the **“Offshore”**

The 2018 film, “Level 16” is a variation on “The Island”. Girls are bred in an enclosed compound in which every moment of their lives is stringently controlled, and perpetually monitored. The idea is to OBEY, and thus remain “pure”. Their hope is that, if they do as they are told, they will eventually be **“chosen”** (i.e. adopted by a loving family, and thus released into a wonderful world beyond the walls of the

compound). As with “The Island” the residents are made to believe that they are blessed to be confined to the compound, as it is PROTECTING them from a dangerous exterior. In “The Island”, the danger is the radiation from a (fictional) nuclear winter; in “Level 16”, it is poisonous air, perhaps from some kind of (fictional) environmental disaster. Thus fear (based on some sort of hobgoblin) is employed in concert with the false hope (visions of a promised hereafter). Of course, the scheme is a ruse, from which those in charge stand to benefit. (In both cases, it is a for-profit venture running the show; one selling healthy organs, the other selling healthy skin.)

The girls in “Level 16” are told that the highest virtue is obedience; and highest vice is curiosity. Their existence is defined by strict daily ritual. They are to never question anything, and are to follow every rule. Otherwise, they will face punishment. The promise of being “chosen” is enough to keep each girl in compliance–all the while keeping her hopes up. For, in the end, each girl is led to believe that it will all be worthwhile.

Even the most sanctified folklore has employed the motif of a Paradise in a far-off land…a place that only THE ELECT might find. Medieval Europeans dubbed this fata morgana, **“Cockaigne”**. Medieval European sailors told of **“Fiddler’s Green”**. Here are 62 more examples of this leitmotif in sanctified folklore:

- **Vedic** legends of “Videha” and of “Sveta-Dvipa” [White Island, the abode of Vishnu]. Hindus also posit “Svarga” [alt. “Vaikuntha”; “Paramapadam”]. {5}
- **Jain** legends of “Saket[a]”. Jains also posit “Siddha-sila” [alt. the “Deva Loka”].
- **Buddhist** legends of “Jambu-dvipa” [Island of the Jambu trees]. Buddhists also posit “Khembalung”, “Tushita”, and the (Sukhavati) “Pure Land”. {12}
- **Tibetan** legends of “Shambhala” (with its city of “Kalapa”); as well as the mythical Mount Potalaka. Tibetans also posit “Nghe-Beyul Khembalung”.
- **Tamil** legends of “Kumari Kandam” / “Kumari Nadu”
- **Chinese** legends of “Penglai” / “Horai”
- **Korean** legends of “Asadal”
- **Japanese** legends of “Takama-ga-hara”
- **Siamese** legends of “Muang Thaen[g]” and “Ko Kaeo Phitsadan” [Magical Island]
- **Malay** legends of “Gangga Negara”
- **Sumerian** legends of “Dilmun
- **Akkadian** legends of “Aratta” (a place of gold and jewels; home of Inanna).

- **Assyrians** told of the mythical Cedar Forest in the Far East (ref. the Epic of Gilgamesh; likely Elam or Dilmun), at the far end of which there is the mountain known as “Mashu”. {6}
- **Persian** legends of “Kaaf-kuh” / “Kuh-y Kaaf”. Ancient Persians (i.e. Zoroastrians) also posited “Frashokereti”. {2}
- **Ancient Egyptians** posited the afterlife paradise, “Sekhet-Aaru” [the “Fields of Aaru”; i.e. Reed Fields].
- **Ancient Greek** legends of “Themiskyra” [in Pontus, fabled city of the Amazons] and of the blissful gardens of “Erytheia” (the Red Isle, associated with Tartessos). Ancient Greeks also posited the “Elysian Fields” (as with Homer); or as Virgil later dubbed it, “Elysium”. Hesiod posited “Makaron Nesoi” (Isles of the Blessed). {7}
- **Judaic** legends of “Gan Eden” and of “Ophir”. The first Hebrews also seem to have told of “Olam Haba” (a precursor to “Gan Eden”).
- Practitioners of **Kabbala** posit “Shamayim”–comprised of seven layers.
- The earliest followers of Jesus of Nazareth (members of “The Way”) spoke of “Shamayin” (the Syriac derivative of the Aramaic, “Shamayim”, which was also used in Classical Hebrew). **Nicene Christianity** eventually adopted the Koine Geek moniker, “ouranos”. This is what Christians now refer to as “heaven”.
- Pre-Islamic **Arabian** legends of “[w]Ubar”
- The first **Mohammedans** adopted the Syriac Christian notion of heaven, dubbing it “Jannah” (as it remains in Islam today).
- **Turkic / Altaic** legends of “Uçmag”
- **Mongol** legends of “Ötüken”
- **Gothic** legends of “Arheimar”
- **Celtic** legends of “Annwyn”
- **English** legends of “Avalon”
- **Welsh** legends of “Cantref y Gwaelod”
- **Irish** legends of “Hy-Brasil”. The Irish also posited “Mag Mell” (a.k.a. “Tir Na nOg”).
- **Norman** legends of “Ker-Is” [a.k.a. “Ys”]
- **Spanish** legends of “Cibola”
- **Frisian / Dutch / Flemish** legends of “Luilekkerland”
- **Norse** legends of “Vineta”. The Vikings also posited “Valhalla”. {4}
- **Finnish** legends of “Pohjola” (a local to the far north) and Vainola
- **Slavic** legends of “Buyan”
- **Dacian / Romanian** legends of “Solomanari” [a.k.a. “Sholomance”] (purportedly located somewhere in the Carpathian Mountains)

- **Maori** legends of “Hawaiki”
- **Polynesian** (esp. Hawaiian) legends of “Kahiki”
- **Yaruba** legends of “Ile-Ife” / “Ife-Lodun”
- **Toltec** legends of “Tollan” {9}
- **Aztec** legends of “Aztlan”. The Aztecs also posited “Tlalocan”.
- **Mayan** legends of “Xibalba”
- **Incan** legends of “Paititi”
- **Taino** legends of “Aumatex”
- **Iroquoian** legends of “Saguenay”
- **Inuit** legends of the “Land of the Moon”
- Following Theosophists, **Wiccas** posit the “Summerland”

These are ALL variations of “The Island”: a magical place to which we ALL aspire to end up (if not in this life, then in some sort of hereafter). The enticing gimmick has continued into the modern age–each time, yet another version of “the Island”. (Edgar Cayce, for example, referred to it as the “Plane of Venus”. For more versions of an Edenic “hereafter” in a celestial realm, see my essay: “A Brief History Of Heaven And Hell”.)

The magical destination does not necessarily have to be in a hereafter. The myth of “El Dorado” impelled Spanish explorers to engage in a wild-goose-chase for farcical city’s of gold (during the 16th century). {10} For other Mahayana Buddhists, the vision is of a “Pure Land”. For Pol Pot’s followers, it was a return to the glorious “Angkor”. For Jehovah’s Witnesses, it’s going to be heaven here on Earth (a return of “Eden”). The idea began in Judaic lore as the coming Messianic Age, as expressed in the Book of Isaiah (2:4 and 11:6-9; and explored in chapt. 53); then in the Book of Daniel. It was then coopted for propagandistic purposes in the “Book of Revelation” by John of Patmos, thereby becoming a key component of Pauline (cum Nicene, cum Roman Catholic, cum Millenarian) Christianity.

However, “the Island” typically exists only in an otherworldly place (accessible only after worldly death) because the claim needs to be un-disprovable in order to “work” over a long period of time. If it can never be corroborated, it is–by the same token–not susceptible being invalidated…EVER…by meddling inquirers. (This is why no sane person is still searching for El Dorado or Atlantis. They’re not there; and we can now SEE that they’re not there.) Meanwhile, nobody could actually see whether or not there was an alien space-craft hiding behind comet Hale-Bopp…leaving room for a leap of Faith for followers of Heaven’s Gate, who were craving the fantasy that had been peddled to them.

The key is to maintain a state of blissful obliviousness. For the game cannot be exposed for what it really is. The facade must be maintained at all costs. Those in power are DOING EVERYONE ELSE A FAVOR by wielding their power as they do.

Those WITH power USE that power to MAINTAIN that power. As John Stuart Mill put it, throughout history, "all privilege and powerful classes have used their power in the interest of their own selfishness." Do this entails keeping the rank and file in check.

There are three nations in which the level of totalitarianism is absolute: Turkmenistan, Brunei, and North Korea. Granted, ABSOLUTE totalitarianism is quite rare; but, in being an extreme case, it is illustrative of how the phenomenon operates in lesser degrees. The trick, we find, is enforced insularity: In such nations, NOBODY is aware of how dismal and backward it really is. They are utterly oblivious, as they are cut off not only from the rest of the world, but from Reality. It's no wonder that—as with Burma and Djibouti—these nations are referred to as "hermit kingdoms". We find this to a slightly lesser degree with certain other fascist regimes—as with Saudi Arabia and China.

And so it goes: The thinking and behavior of the masses is MANAGED in order to ensure everyone countenances the prescribed thoughts / acts—thus sustaining the status quo. Orthodoxy serves those who benefit most from the incumbent power structures…even as those who are duped into playing along are under the impression THEY will be the ultimate beneficiaries. Consequently, compliance is held up as the highest virtue while heterodoxy is seen as heresy. This is how fascism works: a fact that, at present, is most blatantly illustrated by the aforementioned nation-States…as well as Israel (see my essay on "The Many Faces Of Fascism").

Attempts to de-construct false consciousness (by understanding the power structures that facilitate it) were pioneered by the Frankfurt School (as Critical Theory). Sycophantic followers are duped into playing along with (what is often) a choreographed false consciousness, where those in power serve as the impresarios, demanding we all follow the assigned choreography. Edward Hunter, the psychologist who coined "brain-washing", defined it as the methods by which an entire nation can be put under hypnotic control—as found in Stalinist Russia, North Korea, and Maoist China. The trick is to ensure that those who are captured develop a dependence on—nay, reverence for—their captors. Their subjugation is seen as a mode of salvation.

This involves many things—from the deployment of mind-numbing distractions to a regime of surreptitious monitoring. But more than anything else, it is a matter of conditioning—be it through propaganda or incessant repetition. It is within this climate that pathologies germinate; and neuroses flourish. The point, of course, is for those in power to ENGINEER those neuroses such that they serve the desired purpose.

Freud pointed out that the manipulation of powerful myths often plays to subconscious hopes and fears; thereby stoking—then exploiting—desires and neuroses to its own ends. He noted that this psychical boondoggle often leads people to embrace their own subjugation. In the 1920's, Edward Bernays (Freud's nephew, who worked for the right-wing political operative, George Creel) and Walter Lippmann pioneered propaganda theory. They showed how this ability to "manufacture consent" (which they were enthusiastically FOR) was useful for managing public sentiment. In the 1950's, C. Wright Mills explored how the "power elite" (from investment bankers to impresarios of the military-industrial complex) were gaming the system for their own ends, at everyone else's expense. In the 1960's, theorists like Michel Foucault showed how those in power manipulate people's worldview (often via Orwellian language games), lulling people into a sense of complacency; thereby snookering them into glibly acceding to their own subjugation.

Noam Chomsky would further critique how socio-economic elites (from corrupt politicians to avaricious corporate executives) "manufacture consent" in order to get the rank and file to acquiesce to their agenda. This can be done by inducing fear (be it Cold War paranoia or anxiety regarding perdition) or hope (be it of a promised land or an afterlife paradise). When people are either neurotic or delusional, it is much easier to manipulate them (to wit: engineer assent to something that would otherwise seem untenable). In the U.S., it was stoked trepidation about communism or terrorism is that led to sanguinity vis a vis the obscenely bloated budget of the military-industrial complex.

The key with being hoodwinked is that we are moved to THANK those who've pulled a fast one on us. If the con works, the con man is seen as a hero, not a villain. It is, after all, this misapprehension that serves as the fulcrum of the con. So it goes with charismatic cult leaders, slick snake-oil salesmen, and—especially—savvy political demagogues.

The aim, then, is to get people to comply, not begrudgingly, but EAGERLY. This resembles a kind of collective Stockholm Syndrome; though it differs in a key respect. For, even in the midst of their infatuation, those afflicted with S.S. are still aware—on some level—that their captors are captors, and that they are captives. They recognize their captivity as captivity even as they become enamored with it. Here, though, while the subjugated become infatuated with their subjugators, they remain utterly oblivious to the fact that that their subjugators are—in any sense—subjugators; or that they themselves are—in any sense—the victims of some kind of subjugation. They see their subjugators as saviors. And their submission is seen as a form of empowerment. Ergo the utility of false consciousness. {18}

All this amounts to a kind of (centrally orchestrated) cognitive debilitation, something that is most flagrantly exhibited in cults—from Haredism / Hassidism to Salafism, from Juche to Scientology. Here in the U.S., the classic cases are cults that are Christian adjacent—from the Watchtower Society to the Church of Latter-Day Saints. (I explore examples at length in “The Long History Of Sacred Texts” and “The History Of Exalted Figures”.) I might be a fringe case (like Heaven’s Gate or the People’s Temple) to mainstream (like Seventh Day Adventism or Pentecostalism). Of course, the biggest cult in history—and the institution most responsible for the phenomenon with which we are presently concerned—is the Roman Catholic Church.

We humans are often inclined to submit to authority because we have been convinced: “If you follow your marching orders, then things will go well for you.” Instilling hope is a potent persuasive tac. (Again, carrots are not the only way to get people to play along. There are sticks in the form of: “Get with the program or you will be consigned to eternal hellfire.” A quasi-plausible admixture of hope and fear serves to incentivize the desired thinking / behavior.)

And so it goes: While religion tends to play off of our deepest fears / insecurities, it also works by instilling a sense of false hope. So it not only thrives off of neuroses; it thrives off of delusive—even fantastical—thinking. The trick is to exploit those who are existentially beleaguered and/or existentially disoriented. (The impresarios of any given religion excel at drumming up—then exploiting—some combination hopes and fears, and using those neuroses / delusions to manipulate the laity.)

Delusive thinking stems from a contrived—though compelling—narrative, which consists of an etiology (fanciful origins) and an eschatology (fanciful destinations). Hence a gilded legacy augers—and justifies—a resplendent destiny. The legacy

offers justification for the designated agenda; the destiny offers vindication—and, in the case of Islam, endless sex with buxom concubines in a celestial seraglio. The ensuing false pride (i.e. the conviction that WE are special) plays an integral role in cult activity, as it convinces participants that they are uniquely positioned—amongst the rest of mankind—in some important way, per whatever captivating cosmogenic scheme those in power have constructed.

The present essay focuses on the destiny part of this false-hope-inducing narrative—specifically as it pertains to a longed-for afterlife (that is: an after-death "life" of irresistible wonders).

The hereafter serves as both a carrot and a stick—that is: it offers reward or punishment depending on how one plays one's cards. We are thus presented with an enticement vs. a deterrent (typically couched in terms of salvation vs. damnation). This gives believers an incentive structure within which they are behooved to operate; as carrots and sticks are each effective at creating motivations. (I explore this binary treatment of the hereafter in "A Brief History Of Heaven And Hell".)

It is the reward / enticement that we will be discussing here. This generally takes the form of an afterlife paradise: an amazing treat that is promised to those who play their cards right (that is: do as they're told). This works best on those who are existentially destitute, and who feel lost at sea. More than anyone else, they are looking for something to shoot for (even if illusory)—which is to say: something that gives them hope (even if false hope).

"The Island" motif is timeless. People are desperate for the hope engendered by the promise of the hereafter–which is why ANY book making the case will sell phenomenally well. The Koran uses the schtick with its depiction of "firdaus" in the afterlife: a lush garden designed like a luxury resort in the sky. The book's authors even adopted the Judeo-Christian "Kingdom of God" leitmotif by rendering Paradise a KINGDOM, "mul'kan" (6:75).

The key to pulling off this scam is to have the vision of the promised destination relentlessly ingrained into the participants' minds. In the film, "The Island", this is done via seductive video footage, simulcast on a jumbo-tron screen EVERY DAY. In Islam, the same thing is accomplished by repeatedly reminding oneself of the promised reward (during "salat") at regular intervals, each and every day. (Psychologists call this "priming".)

Pace the dubiousness of neuro-linguistic programming, conditioning oneself via routine affirmation can be astoundingly efficacious. By incessantly reminding oneself of a given proposition, the chances that anyone might diverge from the designated “straight path” are mitigated. For, just when one might consider “getting out of line”, one is yanked right back into the (fabricated) seductive ethos with the next iteration of the entrancing image.

And what of fear (to wit: the threat of punishment for getting out of line)? If the false hope is powerful enough, there is no need to drum up fear; for hope alone can do the trick. (I explore the use of fear to manipulate people in my essays, “Nemesis” and “The Siege Mentality”.) Supplicants will willingly comply if they are sufficiently transfixed. Remarkably, in “The Island”, the “carrot” worked so well, the corporation did not need to use any “sticks”.

The result is a highly-controlled state of affairs. Everyone knows their place; and the established order is maintained without threat of subversion. The constant message by which the plebians are inculcated is: “Don’t question it. Accept it; because that’s just the way it is.” The con job (what practitioners refer to as the “long con”) has worked since time immemorial. And it has served as a theme for some of the most classic narratives. For example, Frank Herbert’s “Dune” illustrates how those in power use religion to manipulate society. (The “Missionaria Protectiva” was largely about controlling people en masse; and moving the levers of power as they saw fit.) Those in the thrall of the engineered fantasy are rendered pawns in the larger game.

The peddling of false hope is not limited to religion; it can be used politically as well. The quasi-plutocracy that the United States has become (since the mid-70’s) placates the rabble by hawking the so-called “American Dream”. We’re told that “it’s morning in America” by leaders who deign to “keep the hope alive” and instill “false pride” in those entranced by notions of Exceptionalism and divine Providence…even as those same leaders plunder society–ensuring that the well-positioned few can accumulate ever more wealth for themselves at everyone else’s expense; and do so in perpetuity, with impunity. (“This too could be YOU. So just play along, and someday, the spoils WE have may somehow “trickle down” to the rest of you.”) Hence the political Stockholm Syndrome that plagues the United States.

Thoroughly bamboozled, denizens of the underground compound in “The Island” were persuaded to never challenge the established order; and to play along with the prescribed routine–under the impression that it was in their own best interest.

Those in charge were in charge because they DESERVED to be in charge; and everyone was believed to be all-the-better-off for it. Call it “trickle-down deliverance.”

To reiterate: The authorities in “The Island” convinced everyone that EVERYTHING was being done for their own good. (The use of “We’re doing it for your own good” is standard in political propaganda and religious apologetics…just as it is for, say, domestic abuse.) In the story, until we meet our iconoclastic heroes, it did not not occur to ANY of the residents that they were being manipulated or exploited. (Understandably, the thinking went: “Too much curiosity killed the cat. Why jeopardize my chances of getting to THE ISLAND?”)

The unwitting captives were constantly monitored by “the powers that be”…just to ensure everything was copacetic. “Don’t forget, we’re keeping tabs on everything you do each day. So watch your step.” (Sound familiar?) The authorities offered constant reassurance to their subjects: “Don’t worry, we’ve got it all under control.” Of course, that was the problem: They had EVERYTHING “under control”. {1} The hoodwinked denizens of the compound remained blissfully ignorant, day in and day out.

The only ingredient missing in “The Island” was the use of SEX as a “carrot”. There is nothing as effective as the prospect of sex when it comes to the manipulation of men–as any well-compensated female “exotic dancer” will attest. Strippers needn’t perform any sexual favors in order to swindle a man out of hundreds of dollars. Usually, it’s like taking candy from a baby. How so? At strip clubs, men pay for a whimsical IDEA, not for an actuality. The fantasy is all the female performers need provide. This reveals something fundamental about male psychology: It’s the PROSPECT OF the yearned-for spoils that work; whether or not the expectation is realistic. {13}

We don’t need to watch beer commercials or see cologne ads to be reminded that the mere NOTION OF sex persuades–and can hold sway over men in profound ways, regardless of how illusory the prospects of it REALLY HAPPENING might be. For this reason, women have been able to use their sexuality to control men since time immemorial–from plebeians to Roman Emperors. (Rumor has it, some temptresses have even had American presidents eating out of the palm of their hands.) It’s not for nothing that wily seductresses populate folklore–from Delilah in the Hebrew Bible to Matilda in M.G. Lewis’ “The Monk”.

Add the prospects of a carnal dream-come-true to the mix, and the enticement becomes extremely difficult for men to resist–be it a disaffected Bedouin during the Dark Ages or a U.S. Senator last weekend. Unlike in “The Island”, this particular (highly potent) ingredient is not missing in the Koran; it is one of its primary features. “The Island” is an apt metaphor for Islamic eschatology in spite of the fact that sex is not one of the things being peddled. But when the target audience is horny men, hawking coitus with buxom concubines is a surefire way to catch their attention. It’s surprising that MORE religions don’t employ this carrot.

We should bear in mind that life is riven with let-downs and set-backs. Throughout human history, there is no phenomenon that has occurred more than dashed hope. {14} It is a daily occurrence for most of us–from not making a traffic light to a pivotal interaction not panning out as well as we had wished. It does not help when anyone deliberately contributes to this existential trammel by generating false hope in others.

That the human condition is besot by such dispiriting hinderances should not deter us from embracing life–THIS (the only) life, in THIS (the only) world. After all, it is much more difficult to accomplish goals without a positive mental attitude. The trick is to maintain positivity in the midst of adversity…without allowing oneself to become quixotic. Measured optimism ensures one will not become delusive.

Sooner or later, all humans come to realize that–in many situations–it is difficult to discern where hope ends and delusion begins. But there can be little doubt that religion regularly engenders the latter–typically, under the auspices of the former. Level-headed religionists are often aware of this pitfall. They therefore remain cognizant of how their Faith informs their highest aspirations, and are vigilant of the point at which Faith needs to be reigned in. As we navigate the slings and arrows of human existence, it is important to bear in mind that it’s not about what purportedly becomes of us in some after-death “life”; it’s about what we become in this life.

Rather than being thought of as a destination; heaven might instead be thought of something one forges with other people.



“Heaven” And The Peddling Of False Hope

In 1996, a South Korean named Woo Myung founded a spiritual (meditation) movement called “Maum”. Later, he published a booklet entitled, “Stop Living In This Land; Go To The Everlasting World Of Happiness; Live There Forever”.

What does this have to do with the Koran? Well, technically nothing…and yet, in another sense, almost everything. As it so happens, “Maum” resonates with certain people. Why? Because it speaks to universal human yearnings. Indeed, the enticing prospect of immortality–and the lure of eternal happiness–is older than the Epic of Gilgamesh. Indeed, the Sumerians were far from the first to muse about such things.

People have always needed a reason to hope; and when they did not have a reason, they often invented one (often without realizing that they were doing the inventing).

Fancying the idea of a wonderful afterlife is a reminder that if people really, really, really want to believe something, no matter how outlandish, they will invariably find a way to believe it. An ardent desire to think something it true–regardless of how cockamamy it might be–will drive people to convince themselves that it is INDUBITABLY true. Such a conviction–insofar as it is a personal commitment–will then spur them to earnestly (one might say, obstinately) concoct rationalizations–no

matter how specious–for this conviction. The True Believer will do undertake this vociferous process of rationalization POST HOC (and, as the occasion warrants, AD HOC) with a pathological obduracy.

There are both healthy and dysfunctional ways of being “lifted up”, of being inspired. This juxtaposition is best illustrated by aesthetic activity vis a vis cult activity. There is nothing audacious about hoping. Hoping is not an act of courage. It is not the same as unshakable determination. Keeping one’s chin up is a sign of resolve; but this stems from grit, not from wishful thinking. Hope is an analeptic. People crave something to hope for. False hope can be intoxicating; and can be very addictive. It facilitates a dopamine rush–serving as a sort of epistemic amphetamine. That’s why it’s so easy to peddle it.

When it comes to the peddling of false hope, it might be noted that the phrase “wishful thinking” is misleading; as the vast majority of thinking is wishful–and, for that matter, wistful. Only in moments of strict mental discipline, in which a concerted effort is made to be objective, is wishful thinking temporarily suspended. Wishful thinking is the default mode of thought–every waking moment, in virtually every situation. We humans are impetuous and mercurial creatures–susceptible to the forces of provocation and inducement. To be human is to be–intermittently–held captive by one’s cravings; and to be inclined toward caprice. In other words: To be human is to be desirous and fanciful.

It is important to bear in mind that hope in and of itself has never accomplished anything. Nevertheless, it serves an important purpose. Since time immemorial, there has been no shortage of dejection and disillusionment, conditions in need of amelioration. To have aspiration is to invariably experience intermittent disappointment. Contending with setbacks is part and parcel of endeavor. Hence we need hope to forge on. Resolve–nay, dauntlessness–could not exist without hope. The key, then, is to keep one’s hopes consummate with Reality–to remain grounded even as one reaches for the stars. This means not succumbing to the trappings of hucksters (a.k.a. proselytizers) and thereby descend into intoxicating delusion.

Both great art and religion invite us to imagine. The former urges us to formulate possibilities; the latter urges us to indulge in delusion. The former helps us be more in touch with Reality–by CAPTURING Reality even as we are inclined to escape it for a moment. The latter leads us to become terminally disconnected from Reality… while convincing us we are becoming more connected to it.

Put another way: The former involves BALD fantasy while the latter involves VEILED fantasy. With great art, the unreal needn't masquerade as the real. With religion, the unreal MUST masquerade as the real. The aesthete takes something from the art, but eventually comes back to Reality. The religionist aims to escape Reality–seeking permanent refuge in what Nietzsche ironically dubbed "True Worlds". Art is a round-trip ticket; religion is a one-way ticket. When the symphony finishes, when the novel ends, one comes back to the real world; when one goes down the rabbit hole of magical thinking, the cultic mindset does not urge one to climb back out.

So what IS the allure here? The prospect of a final reckoning (a settling of accounts) is tremendously reassuring, as it makes the future a promise rather than a specter; a consolation rather than a peril; thereby allaying anxieties whilst bolstering hope. The program on offer urges us to envision better things on the horizon–a tremendously gratifying exercise. The perpetual reassurance that everyone will get what's coming to them enables people to endure the "slings and arrows" of worldly life–girding people to persevere through trying times. It is another version of the Karmic justice posited in Hinduism–though a linear narrative with a terminus (a discrete temporal telos) rather than a perpetual cycle of iterations ("samsara"). Abrahamic eschatology involves a singular Day of Judgement instead of an open-ended process (see my essay, "Brink Porn").

For religionists, there is something more going on than the conjuring of a fantastical destination–a magical place that they might look forward to.

What better way to entice those who are unsatisfied with their lives–disenchanted, even frustrated, with human existence. "What's the point of it all? What's this all for? Why bother?" And so we invent what Nietzsche dubbed "True Worlds": a "hereafter" to look forward to; to make it all seem worthwhile (what is dubbed "akhira" in Islam).

In his "Atheist Manifesto", French philosopher, Michel Onfrey noted: "The three [Abrahamic Faiths] call on their faithful to renounce life in the here and now because they will one day be forced to accept its loss. Their glorification of a fictional beyond prevents full enjoyment of the real here… They establish death on earth for the sake of eternity in heaven. In so doing, they spoil the only gift we possess: the living matter of a potential existence killed in the egg just because its life is finite! Fleeing life in order not to have to die is not a good bargain. It pays death twice, when once is enough."

Onfrey notes how humans “invent afterlives, gods, or a single god… prostrate themselves, humble themselves, abase themselves, weave fables, and believe unquestioningly in the tales they have so painstakingly concocted in order to avoid looking their [mortality] in the face… extract from this fiction a delirium that draws in its train a welter of dangerous nonsense and of new ways out. [Humans] work passionately to bring about what they nevertheless hope more than anything else to avoid: death.” (Here, Onfray echoes the insights found in Ernest Becker’s “The Denial of Death”.)

Onfrey thus expressed dismay at “how readily men construct fables in order to avoid looking Reality in the face. Tee invention of an afterlife would not matter so much were it not purchased at so hight a price: disregard of the real, hence willful neglect of the only world there is.” But trafficking in this enticing vision is a very useful way to bring people en masse into one’s thrall.

The peddling of false hope is astoundingly effective at keeping people docile, compliant, deferential to the established order (read: incumbent power structures). In the modern age, the commodification of false hope has streamlined this process.

As a con artist might say, “I plucked his dreams right out of his head and then sold them right back to him–and at a good price too!” In the Koran, we find the longings of disaffected Bedouins: shaded pavilions, flowing streams / fountains, lush gardens, plenteous fruit, angelic concubines with ample breasts, etc. (Not only is the Koranic heaven a splendiferous seraglio; it is a bordello.) The adolescent male’s vision of heaven is an eternity’s worth of ice cream and blow-jobs. There can be little doubt that, had the technology been available, they would have thrown into the mix a large-screen TV with surround-sound and a Sony Playstation as well.

That the authors of Islam’s holy book–Arabian men during the Dark Ages–conjured an luxury-resort-in-the-sky of this comically puerile nature is completely unsurprising. So far as they would have been concerned, the epitome of human existence would SURELY be lounging around in the shade–on comfy, well-upholstered couches–surrounded by an endless buffet, with a coterie of large-breasted virgins at their beck and call. Indeed, this is STILL the template for the daydreams of virtually any teenage boy, anywhere in the world, regardless of the era. Paradise is simply the satiation of primal appetites.

Origen once noted that Paradise is not a place; but a condition of the soul. We would be wise to bear this in mind as we ogle visions of a celestial Cockaigne worthy of an adolescent's daydream. Yet this doesn't detract from the fact that dangling the mesmerizing allure of eternal Paradise under the noses of wayward desert-wanderers was a promising venture in Arabia during the Dark Ages. Indeed, in such environs, charged as it was with disenchantment and superstition, the trappings of such an enticing offer surely had a pungent air of plausibility about them…especially to vulnerable, illiterate Hijazis who felt aggrieved / disaffected in some way…and especially with wayward Bedouins who were likely contending with a severe bout of disillusionment. As Walter Benjamin aptly put it: "It is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us." Alas, this is the case even when the hope being peddled is fraudulent.

The notion that most of what is GOOD about human existence is found after death (in "another life") is as old as the yearning for immortality. It is concomitant with the universal craving for a "final reckoning". Judgement Day is, after all, an ultimate settling of accounts–whereby everyone eventually gets what's coming to them. What's not to love about THAT?

So it comes as little surprise that "heaven" continues to be a booming business today just as it has been since time immemorial. The prospect is especially alluring if one can convince one's followers that it's just around the corner (see Mohammed of Mecca and his Bedouin followers, William Miller and his flock of apocalypse-junkies, Charles Taze Russell and the Watchtower Society, Jim Jones and the People's Temple, Marshall Applewhite and Heaven's Gate, etc.) Human credulity knows no bounds. This has been true virtually everywhere for all of recorded history.

If one packages it well, delusion can be drummed up, and parlayed into a cash cow. For the savvy false-hope-peddler, promises of a magnificent afterlife can be turned into a cash cow. This goes back to Isaac Watts' "The World To Come" in 1745, and on through Rebecca Ruter Springer's "My Dream Of Heaven" in 1898 and Gary Woods' "A Place Called Heaven" in 1902. Today, the cavalcade of trash-pulp on "heaven" persists year after year–a publishing bandwagon that follows from the ironclad law of supply and demand. Case in point is 1992's mega-seller, "Embraced By The Light". Let's survey the incidence of similar publications (in America) going back two decades:

- **2001:** "Heaven" (Ryle), "Heaven & Beyond", and "Someday Heaven"

- **2003**: “A Brief History Of Heaven”, “The Five People you Meet In Heaven”, and “Heaven Is So Real”
- **2004:** “Heaven” (Alcorn)
- **2005:** “Heaven: My Father’s House” (paperback edition)
- **2006:** “50 Days Of Heaven”, “One Minute After You Die”, “Life After Death”, and “Nine Days In Heaven”
- **2007:** “90 Minutes In Heaven” and “Revealing Heaven”
- **2008:** “Glimpses Of Heaven”
- **2009:** “Heaven and the Afterlife”, “Evidence Of The Afterlife”, and “My Time In Heaven”
- **2010:** “My Dream Of Heaven”, “The Boy Who Came Back From Heaven”, “Flight To Heaven”, “40 Days In Heaven”, and “More Glimpses of Heaven”
- **2011:** “Heaven Is for Real” and “My Trip To Heaven”
- **2012:** “My Journey To Heaven”, “Heaven Is Beyond Your Wildest Expectations”, “To Heaven And Back”, “Heaven Changes Everything”, “Proof of Heaven”, and Billy Graham’s “The Heaven Answer Book”
- **2013:** “Conversations Beyond Proof Of Heaven”, “Appointments With Heaven”, “Waking Up In Heaven”, “Touching Heaven”, “Heaven: Better By Far”, “The Story Of Heaven”, “Beyond Heaven’s Door”, “Heaven Hears”, and “Heaven Is Real, But So Is Hell”
- **2014:** “Glimpsing Heaven”, “Falling Into Heaven”, and “The MAP of Heaven” (Eureka!)
- **2015:** “Imagine Heaven”, “The Physics Of Heaven”, and “Answers To Your Questions About Heaven”
- **2016:** “The Real Heaven”, “When Heaven Invades Earth”, and “Visits From Heaven”
- **2017:** “The Gift Of Heaven” and “What Happens After You Die: A Biblical Guide To Paradise, Hell, and Life After Death”
- **2018:** “People I Met At The Gates Of Heaven” and “A Place Called Heaven: 10 Surprising Truths About Your Eternal Home”
- **2019:** “Heaven: Your Real Home” and “Heaven: The Place We Long For”
- **2020:** “A Place Called Heaven: Your Journey Home” and “Secrets Of Life After Death” (a compilation of Beyond The Veil To Heaven, Beyond Earth Through Heaven’s Gate, and Conversations From Heaven)

When it comes to perfidious expositors who prey on society’s most gullible, the list is endless. The dogmatic landscape is ripe for charlatanry; and the peddling of false hope is a lucrative business. Americans especially are given a steady diet of

delusive thinking–be it the “American Dream” for those embrace free-market fundamentalism…or some paradise awaiting them after death. The promise: Things will turn out well for you…if you play your cards right. If you fail, you have nobody to blame but yourself.

Afterlife pablum is a booming business. Scam artists exploit the yearning for “something more than just this” felt by those who are existentially beleaguered. Each publication provides a gratifying answer to the pressing question: “What’s the point of it all?”, furnishing the audience with something to look forward to (that is: something to make it all worthwhile). Beholding this barrage of trash-pulp, one can’t help but wonder: What in heaven’s name is going on here?

Many of the above books were blockbusters. All of them claimed to be “true stories” or genuine accounts or some kind of “inside scoop” (often capitalizing on the “NDE” craze). Every one of them was a sham. Yet millions of credulous Americans bought into it. In each case, the authors don’t quite let on how, exactly, they became privy to this incredible information. No matter. The publication of such pablum has–as always–been a bonanza.

Dependably, uneducated Christians eagerly ate up every word. But WHY? For the very reasons that so many have bought into the idea of “Jannah” portrayed in the Koran. (2009’s “In Heaven! Experiencing the Throne of God” could have been the title of a book by an Islamic theologian.)

What’s going on here? Are votaries really this credulous? Is it possible that so many people could be so prone to delusion? The unfortunate answer: yes. It is instructive to note that the same psychological mechanisms are at work with those seduced by get-rich-quick schemes. We are all susceptible to the trappings of false hope; especially when we feel desperate or frustrated. Bear in mind that the powerful allure of such operations (i.e. pyramid schemes; a.k.a. “multi-level marketing”) is not the ACTUAL products they might happen to be selling; it’s the dreams of fabulous wealth that they are peddling. In other words: They’re selling a VISION (read: mirage), and thus a FEELING (read: intoxication). People are duped into joining these organizations for the same reasons people are persuaded to join cults. A savvy evangelist is simply a kind of skilled salesman.

As with the film, “The Island”, we all want to get to some kind of Promised Land–however we happen to define it. The American Dream–replete with Rolexes, penthouse suites, and yachts? An eternal orgy with a coterie of nubile, young nymphs and an endless buffet of tasty snacks? Pick your fantasy.

People are hungry for hope. They simply require something enticing to hope FOR. (For men, this is often some combination of pussy and food.) Consequently, they are predisposed to embrace the alluring fantasy hawked in the above books. Assuming it’s packaged well, such material will tend to sell like gangbusters (and be quite lucrative for those who concoct compelling narratives). This is not some secret that was recently discovered by imaginative authors in America during the past few decades; it has been the case since time immemorial. Indeed, the “lush garden with rivers of milk and honey” leitmotif goes as far back as archaic Egypt. An endless supply of scrumptious dining options? Well-upholstered couches in shaded pavilions? Access to sex with buxom women…FOREVER? (The “houri” in the Koran were ripped straight from Zoroastrian lore.) The Church of Latter-Day Saints even promises men the chance to rule their own planet. Once one is convinced that such prospects are REAL, one will be ready to do just about anything to secure the reward.

Amusingly, per the aforementioned book titles, contemporary readers were treated to sojourns to the hereafter that lasted for 50 days, 40 days, 9 days, 90 minutes, and 1 minute. (The visits reported in the other books listed above seem to have transpired over a variety periods.) In each case, one wonders how the elapsed time was measured. (?!?) But the duration of the visit is beside the point; it’s the proposition that some people have been treated to a SNEAK PREVIEW of what’s in store for the rest of us (if, that is, we play our cards right).

We might imagine what a book would be like after having spent a BILLION YEARS in heaven. “One day, we did this. And the next day we did this. And the day after that, we did this.” “A Billion Years In Heaven” would be a very long, tedious book, indeed (where “this” would be something between “eating grapes” and “basking in the glory of god”, whatever that’s supposed to mean). I discuss the insufferable tedium that would be “eternal bliss” in an astral Paradise in my essay, “A Brief History Of Heaven And Hell”.

In 2012, “Heaven Is For Real” was the best-selling (non-novel) book in America. Smelling cash, Sony’s TriStar would make it into a movie the following year (released in 2014); and ended up grossing a staggering $91.4 million in the U.S. {8} That such an obvious sham was such a big hit is testament to the kind of blatant nonsense people are willing to swallow whole–if, that is, it is sufficiently captivating.

The psychological mechanisms that enable millions to believe the claims in “Heaven Is For Real” are the same ones that enable HUNDREDS of millions to believe the claims in Islam’s holy book. (Well, ALMOST the same psychological mechanisms. There were no concubines in “Heaven Is For Real”, as the target audience was not EXCLUSIVELY horny men, as it was for the Koran. The rated-PG nature of the American tale limited the carrots that it could deploy to rainbows and butterflies.)

In the Abrahamic tradition, the notion of a hereafter began as the conception of “Sheol” in early Judaic lore–which, like the ancient Greek “Hades” or ancient Egyptian “Duat”–was neither heaven nor hell. However, the ravenous hunger for a fantastical hereafter is not limited to the Abrahamic religions.

For splendrous depictions of the hereafter (as a place for the righteous), we can go back to legends of “Deva Loka” in Jain cosmology. Or we can look to “Khembalung” in Buddhist cosmology or the “Field of Reeds” in ancient Egyptian cosmology or the “Elysian Fields” in Greco-Roman cosmology or “Tian” in Ancient Chinese cosmology. Members of Heaven’s Gate posited the “Next Level”–the gateway to which was awaiting them behind a passing comet. The examples go on and on (as enumerated in my “A Brief History Of Heaven And Hell”).

The key is to provide a FINAL DESTINATION that makes it all worthwhile–thereby catering to the universal craving for something to “shoot for” and the yearning for a final “settling of accounts” in which everyone ultimately gets what’s coming to them.

Some surveys report that more than half of American Christians think that not only will Jesus (literally) return to Earth to inaugurate the “Rapture”, he will come back IN THEIR LIFETIME…and whisk them away to heaven. Such false hope does nobody any good. But that is precisely the kind of outright delusion enjoined by both Christian Millenarians AND by a literal reading of the Koran. We often underestimate how powerful such staunch conviction is for the True Believer.

With a well-crafted sales pitch, intense yearning can be parlayed into false certainty. Because of this, the art of persuasion can be even more compelling than sound argumentation. Facts are beside the point when one is committed to–nay, has become dependent on–a proposition being (considered) true.

To instill false hope, Abrahamic lore has proffered a fantastical array of utopian idioms from Zion to the Kingdom [alt. City] of God. With all the delusive talk about a coming "New Jerusalem", the Judeo-Christian strain of utopianism has been the predominant version in the West (see my essay: "City Of The Beloved").

Understanding all this, we discover that a hyper-romantic reading of the Koran is predicated–in large part–on the infantilization of the audience.

The point is worth repeating: The fata morgana proffered by the Koran is a seductive vision reiterated with each daily prayer. It is the incessant repetition (over an entire lifetime) that makes it so effective; as such a strictly-enforced ritual is designed to keep certain mental habits deeply ingrained. (This is, after all, how conditioning works.) Hence "salat" is mandated five times each and every day. Following this routine (the key is that it is ROUTINE) engenders deep-seated false hope; thereby helping to ensure that everyone remains "in line" and continues to play along. This process involves what behaviorists dub "reinforcement"—PERPETUAL, CHRONIC reinforcement. (I discuss how scripted / choreographed propitiation "trains" neural pathways in my essay on "Prayer".)

When the prospect of placating a vindictive deity is the sine qua non of life, then all conception of "hope" becomes rather blinkered. Surely, Progressive Muslims have a more expansive, Reality-grounded conception of "hope" than this. It is safe to assume that no sane Muslim is waking up each morning eagerly awaiting the celestial fanfare–a LITERAL blowing of horns–heralding the arrival of the Apocalypse. (For more on that topic, see my essay, "Brink Porn".)

Even so, per Islam's holy book, the promise of bountiful remuneration in an after-death Valhalla is the basis for all hope. Indeed, this is the ONLY sense of hope proffered by the Koran's authors. Presumably, most denizens of the Ummah do not deign to limit themselves to such an obtuse existential purview; so they should have no qualms embracing a non-fundamentalist approach to their scripture.

Since time immemorial, society's impresarios have controlled people via the systematic inculcation of false hope. The "something wonderful to look forward to" gimmick typically involves some kind of utopian destination…conveniently situated

AFTER death so that the bold claim can never be verified. (It's amazing what people will accept on blind faith if the offering is enticing enough.) Today, the peddling of salvation is a booming industry (see my essay, "The Island").

The allure of some "Kingdom of God" is strong–as demonstrated by, say, the members of Heaven's Gate, who eagerly looked forward to moving on to the "Next Level". This is a form of the old "Chance to free a prisoner who's an extremely wealthy man (who'd be very grateful for your contribution)" con–in which a massive pay-day is promised to the "mark" in return for participating the noble cause NOW. Grifters have been using this scam since time immemorial, exploiting the (near-universal) penchant for false hope. If the "sales pitch" is good enough, those who are easily-duped will swallow the story hook, line, and sinker.

Anticipation for the "big pay-off" is often too tempting to resist. The prospect of being recompensed with bountiful rewards at some undisclosed point "later on down the road" is often met with: "Great! Where can I sign up for the program?" There is no greater instance in which people "took the bait" than with the "Sahabah" (earliest Mohammedan acolytes).

In order to cope with the drudgery of everyday life, and as a way to cope with life's travails and set-backs, we all need a fantasy–of one kind or another–to cling to. Such pending consolation helps us "get through" in the meantime. In terms of corralling people and keeping them subdued (and placated), this works like a charm. For if everyone is under the impression that the tribulations of the "current" life are a moot point (because what REALLY matters is the Valhalla to come), then everyone will become resigned to even the most dire lot in life. So long as they have something to look forward to, it makes it all worthwhile. They will cope. They will endure.

This urge can be exploited. As any savvy politician eventually learns, it's all about making bold promises–preferably with grandiose proclamations–that attracts a following.

The trick is to cajole the audience into embracing a proposition by showing them why they should WANT to believe it. One can do this by repeatedly reminding people how wonderful it would be if the proposition were true. This is how faith-healers, preachers, and snake-oil salesmen work. People buy magical elixirs not

because they have good reason to believe they'll actually work; but because they desperately want to believe such things will work. When yearning is strong, it is a small step from wishful thinking to steadfast conviction.

We humans are eminently pragmatic creatures; so we will tend to do what (seems to) work. Considering that we are meaning-making machines, the implications of this can be rather surreal. When meaning is conferred, the act ITSELF of believing has utility. Certain beliefs can be tremendously gratifying (and offer solace in trying times) irrespective of their credence. When people really, really, really want to believe X, they will find a way to believe it. In getting themselves to believe an enticing-yet-groundless proposition, some will tend to hoodwink themselves into, well, actually believing it. The second-order belief (belief in believing X) is soon construed as a first-order belief; and the rest is history.

Such epistemic somersaults are done whether it is wanting to meet grandma in an afterlife or wanting the magic crystal hanging around one's neck to protect one from misfortune.

Under the right circumstances, nascent hankerings within every one of us can be parlayed into false hope with surprising ease. False hope is what enables faith healers and snake oil salesmen to prey on those who are especially desperate and credulous. (One might say that fundamentalist religion is like plunging into a frothing sea of snake oil rather than merely sipping it from a flask.)

Exploiting the (universal; inherently human) craving for hope is probably the SECOND oldest profession. Get-rich-quick hucksters get rich quickly by selling get-rich-quick schemes to those who long to get rich quickly. At the end of the say, it's all about selling dreams to suckers. (Indeed, one of the most expedient ways to become wealthy is to write a best-selling book on how to become wealthy.) The gimmick is as old as the existence of dupes. Simply promise what people can't (or probably won't) get in "this" life in "the next" life…if only they follow THESE instructions, that is. Having knowledge constitutes power, as the old adage attests; but sometimes even more indicative of power is the ability to doll out the ILLUSION OF knowledge to others. {15}

Sapience entails recognizing that a healthy version of "faith" operates in a very different way than it does in its religious sense. It is faith in humanity rather than faith in a deity that makes people better people (and the world a better place).

This involves measured hope (grounded in Reality) rather than a delusive wishfulness (based on flights-of-fancy). Think of the kind of belief in Journey's "Don't Stop Believing". Such belief is a function of humanism, not of dogmatism.

To conclude: The peddling of false hope has been a viable industry since The Day of Final Judgement was propounded in ancient Egypt (ref. the opening discussion of the present book). In other words, the authors of the Koran were capitalizing on the exact same human proclivity that exists today, the same one that enabled the corporation in "The Island" to pull off its elaborate stunt, and the same one that kept the Egyptian rabble "in line" five millennia ago.

The moral of the story: False hope sells. Always has; always will.

The neuro-science involved in such delusive thinking helps to explain much about our human nature. Cult activity is largely about manipulating people–and doing so by triggering the dopaminergic system (that is: instigating dopamine rushes). Here's the key: A dopamine rush is more about ANTICIPATION than it is about the actual reward. This is why instilling a sense of hope–even if utterly spurious–can be incredibly persuasive. When it comes to anticipating reward, a sense of certainty–even FALSE certainty–significantly reduces the cognitive load, thereby stream-lining the activation of the dopamine pathways.

Moreover, dopamine-release reinforces MOTIVATION. Indeed, dopamine is not merely about the anticipation of reward; it facilitates goal-directed behavior (actions that are seen as necessary to secure the anticipated reward). As Robert Sapolsky put it in "Behave": dopamine "binds" the value of a reward to the resulting action. The motivation arising from dopaminergic projections to the prefrontal cortex are what move us to take action. "In other words, dopamine is not about the happiness of reward; it's about the happiness of pursuit of reward" (p. 74). He adds that contemplating a deferred reward (what promises of heaven are ALL ABOUT) can amplify these effects.

In the Occident, notions of heaven date back to Mithra-ism and Orphism. In the Orient, notions of heaven go back to the "Bhagavata Purana" and the Sutra of the "Land of Bliss". The leitmotif is roughly the same: A wondrous afterlife awaits those who do the right things in THIS (worldly) life.

From the Egyptian “Book of the Dead” to the Tibetan “Book of the Dead”, man has speculated about an after-death “life”–and the logistics of a hereafter–in countless ways. The notion of heaven in Abrahamic theology goes back to the Book of Enoch; while the notion of an End Days goes back to the Book of Daniel (put into overdrive by the “Book of Revelation”).

Instilling hope is, of course, the best way to buoy people who are enduring tribulation. The trick is to convince people that wonderful things are held in store for them. Creating an effective incentive structure involves both carrots and sticks. In the case of Christianity and Islam, this takes the form of Paradise as a lure; while Perdition is used as a scare-tactic.

The focus on heaven in Dar al-Islam was captured in the theme of all the works by the renown Chinese (Qing) proselyte, Liu Zhi of Ying-tian (late 17th / early 18th century). Each pertained to heaven [“Tian”]: “Tian-fang Xing-li”, “Tian-fang Tian-li”, “Tian-fang Zimu Jie Yi”, and “Tian-fang Zhi-sheng Shi-lu”.

The gimmick here is timeless, for it is a matter of exploiting the vulnerabilities in human psychology, which–by definition–exist across cultures. Those who are most cunning in perpetrating this scam do so to staggering aplomb. Indeed, the more savvy con-men (read: religious leaders) target the most anxious, the most credulous, capitalizing on the foibles endemic to human nature.

The ultimate carrot is a COSMIC carrot. Some marvelously euphoric afterlife is presented to eager supplicants in the way that a magician offers the audience a card–in that it is a ruse, a distraction from what’s REALLY GOING ON. The more existentially disoriented one is, the more likely one is to fall for it.



Footnotes:

{1 “The Island” was a spin-off of the 1979 film, “Parts: The Clonus Horror”. Even in the earlier film, we find the use of false hope to manipulate–and delude–the masses. Denizens of the compound in “The Island” had their purpose in life assigned to them. This is an existential blunder with which all three Abrahamic religions are fraught (though the Koran takes this strategy to new heights). Within the Christological idiom, this hoax was most brazenly articulated by Rick Warren’s (utterly deranged) self-help book, “The Puropse-Driven Life”, in which we are told that we only have purpose in life insofar as we give our lives to god; as god ASSIGNS us purpose. In reality, purpose needn’t be assigned to us. It is we–as individuals–who must give our own lives meaning / purpose (or, as the case may be, fail to give our own lives meaning / purpose); a point made in Victor Frankl’s poignant “Man’s Search For Meaning”. Religion’s biggest scam is that we need an external agent to do it all FOR us…thereby putting us at that agent’s mercy. We thereby leave ourselves in the hands of anyone who–we are convinced–SPEAKS FOR that agent (see my essay, “The History Of Exalted Figures”.}

{2 The earliest use of a term for an afterlife Paradise was in Old Avestan: “pari-dayda” / “pari-daeza”, which referred to a special, gated place. That seems to have been derived from the Assyrian word for “domain”: “pardesu”. Meanwhile, “Eden” is a derivative of the Sumerian / Akkadian term, “edinnu”; and was later incorporated into the Aramaic lexicon (meaning a lush / fecund place). Ancient Hebrew eventually appropriated the term to refer to a place of pleasure. Christians adopted the vernacular for their own purposes. Mohammedans took the idea and ran with it. So far as they were concerned, the longed-for Edenic venue was as much a bordello as it was a seraglio. For more on this topic, see my essay: “A Brief History Of Heaven And Hell”.}

{3 I discuss this leitmotif in my essay, “City Of The Beloved”. Augustine’s vision of a Kingdom Come reflects the overwrought portrayal of the “New Jerusalem” found in the Book of Revelation–a city with streets of gold, gates of pearls, and walls inlaid with gems. Unfortunately, the overwrought–often lurid–imagery proffered by John of Patmos caught on, and became an integral part of the “millenarian” Nicene eschatology. As Betsy Hartmann put it, “This promise of a New Jerusalem for the elect, and the cataclysmic violence against people and nature necessary to achieve that goal, has made the Book of Revelation an ideological tool of conquest and empire from the Crusades onwards. You don’t have to be a Christian to be susceptible to John’s logic that the perfect end–the New Jerusalem–justifies the bloody means.” The maudlin depiction of “Jannah” in the Koran falls squarely within the Christian tradition–the sort of thing a neurotic adolescent might concoct if given a few minutes and lots of caffeine.}

{4 “Asgard” was the celestial kingdom in which is located the great hall, of fallen warriors, “Valhalla”; as well as the magnificent “Breidablik” (home of the god, Baldr). There was also “Folkvangr”, in which was located the great hall, “Sessrumnir”. Note that in Norse mythology, the nine realms of the world tree, Yggdrasil were: As-gard[r], Mid-gard[r], Ut-gard[r] / Jötun-heim[r], Vana-heim[r], Alf-heim[r] / Ljosalf-heim[r], Svartalfa-heim[r], Nifl-heim[r] / Hel-heim[r] [alt. Nifl-hel], Muspells-heim[r], and Svartalf-heim[r] / Myrk-heim[r] [alt. Nidavellir].}

{5 Also referenced is the Kingdom of “Kalinga”, which probably corresponded to Orissa (now named “Odisha”) in eastern India.}

{6 This mythical mountain (at the edge of the world) was the source of the Arabian legend of “[d]Jabal Qaf”.}

{7 The Greco-Romans also told tales of the lost city-State, “Atlantis”. For thousands of years, the legend of this sunken island has captured our imaginations and even enthralled us–as legends tend to do. Plato referenced the fabled island kingdom in his “Critias” and “Timaeus”. Related to Atlantis is the legend of a magical, underground world called “Agharti” (a.k.a. “Agartha”), the subject of medieval French occultism (ref. the etiologies of the Occitan fabulist, Antoine Fabre d’Olivet). Tales of the lost city of may have been inspired by the ACTUAL lost city of Helike in Achaea; which was submerged in a natural catastrophe c. 373 B.C. Another city that submerged was the Minoan (then Mycenaean) Pavlo-petri off the coast of Laconia, which dates back five millennia. Another fabled island that was supposed to have sunk was “Kumari Kandam” in Tamil legend. Later tales of Atlantis may have been encouraged by the (now underwater) Egyptian city of Heracleion (a.k.a. “Thonis”), which dated back to the 12th century B.C. and LITERALLY sank (in the late 3rd / early 2nd century A.D.) due to having been built on coastal silt. Of course, aficionados of the legend of this sunken city-state are looking in the wrong place. Atlantis is not in the ocean; it’s in the Timaeus.}

{8 New Age pulp has gotten in on the action as well. The near-death-experience (NDE) industry is a cash cow, as Raymond Moody learned in the 70’s and 80’s. In the 90‘s, self-proclaimed “psychic” Sylvia Brown cashed in on it too. James Redfield’s “Celestine Prophecy” series sold like hotcakes (wherein Shangri La = “Shambhala”). More recently were “The Secret” and “The Shack”, one more daft than the last. ALL of it exploits credulity. ALL of it profits from the universal human longing for something wonderful to look forward to (after death). In 2013, another MD published “Appointments With Heaven”, peddling his own claims of NDE. Meanwhile, an ex-Muslim published a book on her “Extraordinary Journey To Heaven”. In 2015, the appropriately-titled “Oasis Films” produced the cinematic version of “90 Minutes In Heaven”. As it turns out, the film industry is an even bigger bonanza than the publishing industry…which released yet another NDE account, “Imagine Heaven” that year. (Again, we were reminded that the utility of heaven lay in the IMAGINING of it.) Also in 2015, a carbon-copy of “Heaven Is For Real” was published (this time, with a young girl instead of a young boy), entitled “Miracles From Heaven”…which was promptly released as a movie the next year.}

{9 Legends of the proto-Aztec city of Teotihuacan (later known as “Tula”) were based on this city. Also of note is the Nahua / Culhua legend of “Chicomoztoc”, said to have been the birthplace of mankind. This is one of many “Eden” variations around the world.}

{10 These tales were likely inspired by the Tibetan legend of seven idyllic “beyul” [hidden valleys] known as “Nghe-Beyul Khembalung”. They may have also been inspired by the Judaic legends of “Ophir” (depicted as a city of gold and peacocks in the Hebrew Bible). Legends of mysterious lost cities proliferated during the earliest era of exploration in the “New World”. Another was the so-called “Ciudad Blanca” [“White City”; a.k.a. city of the Monkey God], said to be located in the rain-forests of Mosquitia (present-day Honduras). Explorers have often let their imaginations run amok, and hypothesized fantastical cities in mysterious lands–as with European’s hubbub about “Houssa” in the middle of the “Dark Continent”.}

{11 As George Carlin noted, the thing about the American Dream is that you have to be asleep to believe it.}

{12 Also reference “Trayastrimsa”. Other Buddhist theology posits a celestial realm of mirth for those who earn good karma: the astral planes of “Deva” and “Brahma”. Note that the notion of Karmic justice could also be found in Greek mythology, with Persephone (overseer of the underworld), who ensured the upright were appropriately rewarded and the wicked appropriately punished in the hereafter. She also oversaw the dolling out of bounty and perdition during life.}

{13 Men don’t buy swimsuit calendars because they think it will somehow help them get the girls in the photos. In purchasing the calendar, they are buying a fantasy rather than creating an opportunity. And that’s all that’s needed in moments of weakness. (Sales, after all, is primarily about playing to a fantasy–stirring up enticing visions.) Many men are drawn to auto-shows (in which exotic super-cars are exhibited) for many of the same reasons: the opportunity to ogle at something amazing that they will probably never have a chance to drive. To wit: Car aficionados attend the event mostly for the FANTASY, not for the reality. Similar psychical mechanisms are at play, then, whether the spoils are consumer products or vixens. (After all, toys are toys.) Nevertheless, exploiting libidinal impulses tends to be the most effective means of manipulating male homo sapiens. That’s why go-go bars (strip clubs, euphemistically dubbed “gentleman’s clubs” to maintain a veneer of dignity) are such a big hit in virtually every culture in the world; and always will be.}

{14 A close second–just ahead of unrequited love–is unfounded fear (a.k.a. paranoia), as I discuss in my essays “Brink Porn” and “Nemesis”. Also reference the horrific depictions of hell discussed in “A Brief History Of Heaven And Hell”.}

{15 It might be noted that a consumer product (read: fashionable junk) does not have to be material; it can be ideological. The general idea of paradise is a commodity; but a specific, well-crafted vision of Paradise is a premium…for which some people will pay a very high price. Mormon men get the gold medal in this respect–as each is promised the chance to be the ruler of his own planet after he dies. "Golly-gee, what a prize! Sign me up. What is it that I need to do to qualify?" The sales-pitch is preposterous; but it can be enticing to those who are sufficiently credulous. As with most other cults that promise bounteous rewards that are "just around the corner" yet perpetually just out of sight / reach, the Church of Latter-Day Saints is a bastion for men dealing with severe insecurity issues.}

{16 This is what enables brainwashed Muslimahs to don niqabs / burkas, and be under the distinct impression that they are doing so of their own accord. Empowerment via subservience is a common feature of cult activity. Insofar as one can pass subordination off as a kind of EMPOWERMENT, one can get people to do just about anything, and thank you for the privilege.}

{17 Note that "patience" (the virtue that we often discuss) is not the meaning of the Koranic term, "sabr". Rather, "sabr" connotes complete conciliation…followed by constancy. It is a function more of resignation than of what most of us would consider forbearance. In effect, "sabr" involves a willingness to persevere in the face of any/all indications that one's faith is unfounded or in vain. Such dauntless perseverance (one might say, obstinacy) is based on the abiding conviction ("iman") that things will turn out well in the end. Hence the willingness of votaries to "sit tight" and wait…no matter what. In sum: "sabr" is a disposition required for unwavering fealty; an excuse to remain compliant (not put up a fuss). And it seems to make sense when the ENTIRE POINT of life is believed to be, well, getting to "the Island". Just don't cross the gate-keeper.}

{18 False consciousness isn't just operative when it comes to cult activity; it pertains to economics as well. After all, collective delusion is not always religious in nature; it can also be political. In his 1969 Essay on Liberation, Herbert Marcuse noted: "In the advanced capitalist countries, the radicalization of the working classes is counteracted by a socially engineered arrest of consciousness, and by the development and satisfaction of needs which perpetuate the servitude of the exploited. A vested interest in the existing system is thus fostered in the instinctual structure of the exploited, and the rupture with the continuum of repression—a necessary precondition of liberation—does not occur." Hence the boondoggle that is "supply-side economics" with its mythical "trickle-down" effects. (The lie that in

supporting unbridled corporate power, the rank and file will eventually reap the benefits.) As George Carlin once put it, “The thing about the ‘American Dream’ is that you have to be asleep to believe it.”}