

# THE DEATH OF ADAM

ESSAYS ON MODERN THOUGHT

MARILYNNE ROBINSON

**PICADOR**

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*For*  
Frank Conroy  
*and*  
Connie Brothers

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# INTRODUCTION

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THESE ESSAYS were written for various uses and occasions over a number of years. They have characteristic preoccupations — religion, history, the state of contemporary society — and they are all of them, contrarian in method and spirit. They assert, in one way or another, that the prevailing view of things can be assumed to be wrong, and that its opposite, being its image or shadow, can also be assumed to be wrong. They undertake to demonstrate that there are other ways of thinking, for which better arguments can be made.

I often look at primary texts, books generally acknowledged to have had formative impact, because they are a standard against which other things can be judged, for example the reputations of the same works, or the reputations of those who wrote them, or the cultures that produced and received them, or the commentaries and histories which imply that their own writers and readers have a meaningful familiarity with them. If the primary text itself departs too far from the character commonly ascribed to it, then clear wisdom and specialist wisdom (these are typically indistinguishable) have ascribed to it, then clearly some rethinking is in order.

In these essays I launched on what looks in retrospect to have been a campaign of revisionism because contemporary discourse feels to me empty and false. I assumed, I was educated to believe that I would live my life in a civilization of expanding comprehension. The old lost myth of civilization is that it unfolds, that it opens up the realizations of which it is capable, that it instructs itself. Obviously this is in some degree an idealization. But there seemed good grounds to hope that we would learn from the collective life new things about aesthetics, and justice, and language, and social order — about the human project, the human collaboration, about the expression of human exceptionalism in the arts and sciences that declare the strange exhilarations of our strange life on earth. Granting evil, which it seems a dangerous error to consider solvable, human civilizations have created abundant good, refining experience and circumstance into astonishingly powerful visions and dreams, into poems and music which have fallen like a mantle of light over our mere human weakness.

What use are these things, after all? We live in an age of neo-Hobbism, and this is considered a respectable question. Of course, absent these human tentatives there is no way to speak of “use,” a word that implies the preferential subordination of some conditions or outcomes to others — which implies value, in other words. If all that has happened on this planet is the fortuitous colonization of damp stone by a chemical phenomenon we have called “life,” then there is no case to be made for utility. If our myths and truths are only another exotic blossoming, the free play of possibility, then they are fully as real and as worthy of respect as anything else. Or if use or value in the demythologized context signifies the adaptation of a creature to its circumstances, however gratuitous

they may be, then even the universal human predisposition to create and value myths must be assumed to be a form of adaptation, therefore true in the sense and in the degree that these myths make an effective response to some exigency of being.

It all comes down to the mystery of the relationship between the mind and the cosmos. Those who would employ reductive definitions of utility or reality credit their own perceptions of truth with a fundamentalist simple-heartedness, brooking no allusion to complexities and ambiguities and countervailing experience. But if the mind is able to tell us what is true, why not credit its attempts with higher truth? And if its intuitions in these matters seem often to be in error, even to those who do not by any means wish to dismiss them, are not its intuitions always very substantially in error even in matters of science or economics? Is it not in fact a very naive conception of reality, and of its accessibility to human understanding, that would exclude so much of what human beings have always found meaningful, as if by this means fallibility or error or delusion could be localized and rejected?

It seems to me that there is now the assumption of an intrinsic fraudulence in the old arts of civilization. Religion, politics, philosophy, music are all seen by us as means of consolidating the power of a ruling elite, or something of the kind. I suspect this is a way of granting these things a significance, since we are still in the habit of attending to them, though they are no longer to be conceded meaning in their own terms. If they have, by their nature, other motives than the ones they claim, if their impulse is not to explore or confide or question but only to manipulate, they cannot speak to us about meaning, or expand or refine our sense of human experience. Economics, the great model among us now, indulges and deprives, builds and abandons, threatens and promises. Its imperium is manifest, irrefragable — as in fact it has been since antiquity. Yet suddenly we act as if the reality of economics were reality itself, the one Truth to which everything must refer. I can only suggest that terror at complexity has driven us back on this very crude monism. We have reached a point where cosmology permits us to say that everything might in fact be made of nothing, so we cling desperately to the idea that something is real and necessary, and we have chosen, oddly enough, competition and market forces, taking refuge from the wild epic of cosmic ontogeny by hiding our head in a ledger.

I want to overhear passionate arguments about what we are and what we are doing and what we ought to do. I want to feel that art is an utterance made in good faith by one human being to another. I want to believe there are geniuses scheming to astonish the rest of us, just for the pleasure of it. I miss civilization, and I want it back.

I propose that we look at the past again, because it matters, and because it has so often been dealt with badly. I mean the past as a phenomenon has been dealt with badly. We have taken too high a hand with it. By definition it is all the evidence we have about ourselves, to the extent that it is recoverable and interpretable, so surely its complexities should be scrupulously preserved. Evidence is always construed, and it is always liable to being misconstrued no matter how much care is exercised in collecting and evaluating it. At best, our understanding of any historical moment is significantly wrong, and this should come as no surprise, since we have little grasp of any present moment. The

present is elusive for the same reasons as is the past. There are no true boundaries around it, no limit to the number of factors at work in it. When contact between indigenous people in America and the earliest European explorers led to the catastrophic destruction of the native population of the continent by disease, on one side there were whatever transient circumstances of climate or geology permitted and then prevented the movement of people between the Americas and Eurasia; and, on the other side, the Crusades, the plagues, the development of dense urban civilizations in Europe, even a circumstance that had toughened Europeans to pathogens that would be deadly to people with another history. As European "history," this depopulation was not intended, understood, or remembered. Yet it is certainly fair to assume that the history of European settlement of North America, with all that has entailed, would have been radically different if there had been twenty times as many indigenous people here to resist the encroachment. We now can easily imagine someone somewhere urging along a mutation in a bacterium with the thought of improving an industrial process or carrying out some limited, decisive act of war. We can imagine an error, and unintended consequences on a global scale. Modern economic, political, and technological history would be fully implicated in that event. The idea that all history is parochial should be understood to mean only that all history is defective. It must not be taken to justify the very kind of error that makes the enterprise so often futile and dangerous, and surely not to suggest that the problem can be solved or avoided, rigorous as the attempt to do so must be.

I do not wish to suggest in these essays that the past was better than the present, simply that whatever in the past happens to have been of significance or value ought to be held in memory, insofar as that is possible, so that it can give us guidance. Then, too, nostalgia, reaction, and denial, all of which assume a meaningful sense of the past, are potent energies in any civilization at any time. To be sane and manageable they ought to have a solid base than unconstrained fantasy, or prejudice or malice or tendentiousness. This is as much as to say that truth should be adhered to, to the very significant degree that truth can be established. The recovery of the past is now treated as an arcane science, a little like the science that provides the newspapers with a steady stream of diets and curricula and newly identified syndromes in terms of which we are to reform our lives and revise our understanding of ourselves. We are content not to know how the discovery is made that yogurt promotes longevity, for example, or that Jefferson was insensitive to the issue of slavery. We are always happy to assume objectivity and competence, though each dazzling hypothesis awaits displacement by the next, the whole project somehow deriving prestige from its very insubstantiality. Meanwhile, many myths abide, so firmly established in the common mind that no one thinks to challenge them, not even the people who write history. This is not a new phenomenon. History has always been self-serving, polemical, and, very often, simply slovenly. The historians I will look at in the course of this introduction satisfy any ordinary definition of cultural literacy, even to the point of illustrating its perils. So when I find fault I am not suggesting decline. The vices of the present appear in many cases to be failed correctives to the vices of the past.

It has formed some part of my intention in these essays to raise very fundamental questions about



the way our intellectual life, in the narrowest and also the widest sense, has been lived and is being lived now. I am not alone in finding it short on substance, even though some part of it is sternly devoted to the rectification of old wrongs, and some part to the rehabilitation of old values. In this culture, we do depend heavily on the universities to teach us what we need to know, and also to sustain and advance knowledge for the purposes of the society as a whole. Surely it was never intended that the universities should do the thinking, or the knowing, for the rest of us. Yet this seems to be the view that prevails now, inside and outside the academy.

I do not wish to imply that the universities constitute an elite, as they are often said to do. On the contrary. A politician who uses a word that suggests he has been to college or assumes anyone in his audience has read a book is ridiculed in the press not only for pretentiousness but for, in effect, speaking gibberish. Many editors are certain that readers will be alarmed and offended by words that hint at the most ordinary learning, and so they exercise a kind of censorship which is not less relentless or constraining for being mindless. Language which suggests learning is tainted, the way slang and profanity once were. Rather than shocking, it irks, or intimidates, supposedly. It is not the kind of speech anyone would think to free because it is considered a language of pretension or asserted advantage. People writing in this country in the last century used a much larger vocabulary than we do, though many fewer of them and their readers were educated. I think it is the association of a wide vocabulary with education which has, in our recent past, forbidden the use of one. In other words, the universities now occupy the place despised classes held in other times and cultures in that they render language associated with them unfit for general use.

So the universities have become hermetic. At the same time they have lost confidence and definition. Perhaps because the universities preside over our increasingly protracted adolescence, and are associated with the arbitrary chores of grade-getting, and with football and parties, the stigma which has long attached to any book or poem read in high school has spread to the curriculum of the colleges. Graduate students talk of Dickens seminars in which nothing of Dickens is read, art history seminars in which no art is looked at. It is as if these were subjects we master and advance beyond and would be embarrassed to return to, like freshman composition. The curriculum itself is not the issue. However a curriculum is put together, its elements are assumed to satisfy standards which distinguish them as especially significant products of civilization. The problem is that there is something about the way we teach and learn that makes it seem naive to us to talk about these things outside a classroom, and pointless to return to them in the course of actual life. In other words, whatever enters the curriculum becomes in some way inert.

What used to be meant by "humanism," that old romance of the self, the idea that the self is to be refined by exposure to things that are wonderful and difficult and imbued with what was called the human spirit, once an object of unquestioned veneration, has ended. Both institutional education and all the educating aspects of the civilization — journalism, publishing, religion, high and popular culture — are transformed and will be further transformed until the consequences of this great change have been absorbed. Education as it was practiced among us historically reflected its origins in the

Renaissance, when beautiful human creations were recovered from the obscurity of forgotten languages and lost aesthetics, or of prohibition or disapprobation or indifference, and were used to demonstrate the heights which human beings can attain. It is not unusual now to hear religion and humanism spoken of as if they were opposed, even antagonistic. But humanism clearly rested on the idea that people have souls, and that they have certain obligations to them, and certain pleasures from them, which arise from their refinement or their expression in art or in admirable or striking conduct, or which arise from finding other souls expressed in music or philosophy or philanthropy or in the social revolution.

When people still had sensibilities, and encouraged them in one another, they assumed the value and even the utility of many kinds of learning for which now we can find no use whatever. It was not leisure that was the basis of culture, as many have argued, but the profoundly democratic idea that anyone was only incidentally the servant of his or her interests in this world; that, truly and ideally, biography was the passage of a soul through the vale of its making, or its destruction, and that the business of the world was a parable or test or temptation or distraction and therefore engrossing, and full of the highest order of meaning, but in itself a fairly negligible thing.

Literacy became virtually universal in Western civilization when and where it began to seem essential for people to be able to read the Bible. All the immeasurable practical benefits that came with mass literacy, its spectacular utility, awaited this unworldly stimulus. Clearly mere utility is not sufficient to sustain it at even functional levels, though the penalties of illiteracy are now very severe. Reading, above the level of the simplest information, is an act of great inwardness and subjectivity, and this is why and how it had such a profound meaning while it did — the soul encountered itself in its response to a text, first Genesis or Matthew and then *Paradise Lost* or *Leaves of Grass*. Great respect for the text and great respect for, and pleasure in, the reader's subjectivity flourished together. Now they are disparaged together. Dickens must pass through a filter of specialists who can tell us what we must see when we read him. Neither his nor our singularity is of value, nor are we to imagine his spirit acting on ours.

The idea is very well established now that people have areas of competence from which they should not wander, and into which others should not stray. This results in a sort of intellectual desertification, an always more impoverished stock of ambient information to give context to any specific work. For those of us who live in the atmospheres of general educated awareness, and form our views of the world from what we find in respectable nonspecialist sources — and this means even the expert of every kind whenever he or she is reading outside his or her area of expertise — the dearth of good information must necessarily be reflected in false assumptions brought to bear within areas of presumed competence. Americans are astonished to realize that Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln were contemporaries, let alone that Lincoln and much of literate America would have read Marx, who published articles on European affairs for years in Horace Greeley's *New-York Daily Tribune*, and that Marx wrote about Lincoln. They are amazed that Marx also wrote a contemporary account of the Civil War, passionately taking the side of the North. This is only one illustration of the great fact that w

have little sense of American history in the context of world history. Given our power and influence which seem only to grow as disorder and misfortune afflict so many populations, it seems a sad failure that we have not done more to make the world intelligible to ourselves, and ourselves to the world. Shared history is certainly one basis for understanding.

Our Pilgrims, for example, were at least the fourth Calvinist settlement to be attempted in the New World. Three French attempts at colonization had been undertaken half a century earlier, one in Brazil and two in Florida. Jean Cauvin, whom we call John Calvin, was a Frenchman, and his influence was first felt in France. Calvinism was a singularly international movement because its adherents were often forced to seek shelter outside their own countries. Over time, there were Dutch exile churches in England, Italian and French and Dutch exile churches in Germany, French and English exile churches in Switzerland, English exile churches in Holland, French exile churches in England. When the Pilgrims and the Puritans came to North America, they were reenacting a highly characteristic pattern that the people with whom they identified had already carried on for two generations. It is important to our understanding of our origins to realize that they were precisely not provincial, or bound by one cultural perspective, but were a late offshoot of a religious and intellectual movement which arose and developed in continental Europe.

If history has any meaning or value, as we must assume it does, given our tendency to reach back into the past (or what we assume to have been the past) to account for present problems, then it matters to get it right, insofar as we can. Granting the problems of history, some are less insuperable than others. We may never know the full consequences of the introduction of the potato into Europe or appreciate as we should the impact of a trade route or a plague. We can, however, read major writers, and establish within rough limits what they did and did not say. Since Plato and Aristotle, the names of major writers have been a sort of shorthand for cultural history. While the significance of such figures has its limits, it is also true that their influence has been very great indeed — certainly considerable enough to warrant our reading them. Think how much less stupefying the last fifty years might have been if people had actually read Marx. It seems to have been regarded as a species of disloyalty to acquaint oneself with the terms of that catastrophic argument that engrossed the world for so long, except by the people who called themselves Marxists. And they pioneered this strange practice, so prevalent now, of reading *about* a writer they did not read. They wrote about Marx endlessly, in language arcane and abstruse as his never was, and at the same time astonishingly devoid of basic information, for example about what he wrote and where he was published, and how long and how widely the terms now associated with him were in use before he adopted them. And now that we are supposedly talking to the Russians about democracy, how useful it would be if anyone had actually read Jefferson, or Lincoln.

In several of the essays in this book I talk about John Calvin, a figure of the greatest historic consequence, especially for our culture, who is more or less entirely unread. Learned-looking books on subjects to which he is entirely germane typically do not include a single work of his immense corpus in their bibliographies, nor indicate in their allusions to him a better knowledge than folklore

can provide of what he thought and said. I have encountered an odd sort of social pressure as often as have mentioned him. One does not read Calvin. One does not think of reading him. The prohibition is more absolute than it ever was against Marx, who always had the glamour of the subversive or the forbidden about him. Calvin seems to be neglected *on principle*. This is interesting. It is such a good example of the oddness of our approach to history, and to knowledge more generally, that it bears looking into. Everything always bears looking into, astonishing as that fact is.

History has a history, which is not more reassuring nor less consequential than the figures and events it records or constructs or reconstructs, or erases. Calvin, whoever he was and is, walked in the fires of controversy and polemic for centuries, flames of a kind that generally immortalize rather than consume. Yet Calvin somehow vanished. If history means anything, either as presumed record or as a collective act of mind, then it is worth wondering how the exorcism of so potent a spirit might have been accomplished, and how it is that we have conspired in knowing nothing about an influence so profound as his is always said to have been on our institutions, our very lives and souls.

The British historian Lord Acton, writing at the beginning of this century, did not perform this feat of exorcism alone, but it is fair to assume that he had a hand in it, because his influence was very great. In a book titled *History of Freedom* he included “The Protestant Theory of Persecution,” an essay which asserts that Protestantism and especially Calvinism are uniquely associated with illiberalism and repression. He argues — more precisely, he declares — that, while Protestants did not in fact engage in persecution at nearly the same rate Catholics did, their theology required it, while Catholic theology did not. Therefore Protestantism is peculiarly the theology of persecution.

Whether this argument would have merit in any case is a question which will be subordinated here to the question of the adequacy of the writer’s apparently elaborate demonstration that there really was a “theory of persecution” in Protestant theology, and especially in Calvin’s writings. One is staggered at first by the amount of sheer Latin in Acton’s footnotes, which might be taken to imply rigor, and a facility with this formidable tongue sufficient to make him indifferent to the existence of some very serviceable translations of Calvin’s Latin writings into English. Acton was famous in his time for his great erudition. But if one’s eye happens to rest for just a moment on this effusion of fine print, the most terrible doubts arise. For example, the following statement rests on a passage from *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin’s first and most famous work of theology. The passage which Acton cites in a footnote, absolutely does not justify Acton’s characterization of Calvin’s thought, and is in fact famous or notorious for saying precisely the opposite of what Acton implies he says in the following account of it.

Calvin was as positive as Luther in asserting the duty of obedience to rulers irrespective of their mode of government. He constantly declared that tyranny was not to be resisted on political grounds; that no civil rights could outweigh the divine sanction of government; except in cases where a special office was appointed for the purpose. Where there was no such office — where, for instance, the estates of the realm had lost their independence — there was no protection. This is one of the most important and essential characteristics of the politics of the reformers. By making the protection of their religion the principal business of government, they put out of sight its more immediate and universal duties, and made the political objects of the State disappear behind the religious end. A government was to be judged, in their eyes, only by its fidelity to the Protestant Church. A tyrannical prince could not be resisted if he was orthodox; a just prince could be dethroned if he failed in the more

And more to the same effect. But here is the passage from Calvin quoted in Acton's footnote. I include in italics the paragraph which immediately precedes it in the *Institutes*, because it is highly germane, and I supply language Acton omitted from the passage itself, also in italics, insofar as the difference in word order between the Latin and the translation allows them to be set apart.

*But however these deeds of men [that is, the overthrow of Old Testament kings] are judged in themselves, still the Lord accomplished his work through them alike when he broke the bloody scepters of arrogant kings and when he overturned intolerable governments. Let the princes hear and be afraid.*

But we must, in the meantime, be very careful not to despise or violate that authority of magistrates, full of venerable majesty, which God has established by the weightiest decrees, even though it may reside with the most unworthy men, who defile it as much as they can with their own wickedness. For, if the correction of unbridled despotism is the Lord's to avenge, let us not at once think that it is entrusted to us, to whom no command has been given except to obey and suffer.

I am speaking all the while of private individuals. For if there are now any magistrates of the people, appointed to restrain the willfulness of kings (as in ancient times the ephors were set against the Spartan kings or the tribunes of the people against the Roman consuls or the demarchs against the senate of the Athenians and perhaps, as things now are, such power as the three estates exercise in every realm when they hold their chief assemblies), I am so far from forbidding them to withstand, in accordance with their duty, the fierce licentiousness of kings, that, if they wink at kings who violently fall upon and assault the lowly common folk, I declare that their dissimulation involves nefarious perfidy, because they dishonestly betray the freedom of the people of which they know that they have been appointed protectors by God's ordinance.

Obviously, there is no mention of institutional religion here at all, and certainly not of the Protestant Church, which, at the time Calvin wrote these paragraphs, could hardly be said to have existed, and never did exist as the monolith Acton seems to conjure. The justifications given here for resistance to tyranny are precisely political — defense of “the freedom of the people.” Since he finds his chief examples of “magistrates of the people” in pagan governments, clearly Calvin does not consider the political state essentially Christian, let alone Protestant, nor imagine that God acts only to vindicate the rights of the church. Calvin does not discuss the consequences of the absence of officials entrusted by God with the defense of the people, as Acton implies; instead he says the three estates “in every realm” hold the power of restraining kings, and must assert it. Acton's interpretation of the passage is fanciful at best, and could be used as evidence that his Latin was really very poor, if his deletions were not so effectively deployed to disguise the actual drift of Calvin's argument.

The footnote does draw attention to the fact that the long sentence which ends the second Latin paragraph quoted by Acton concludes with the word *veto*. This is a rhetorical strategy of emphasis and irony. *Veto* is the word the Roman tribune of the people spoke to forbid an action of the Senate which he took to be hostile to the interests of the plebeians. In this instance Calvin says *non veto*, “I do not forbid” — the action of a senate in defense of the “lowly common folk.” This is curious language from Calvin, who makes very little use of the first person, and who, as a young fugitive writing anonymously, was hardly in a position to forbid or assent to anything. The use of the word here could be a joke, or a threat, or a promise, or all three at once. In using it, Calvin puts himself in the role of a pagan and entirely political “magistrate of the people.”

Since Acton's subject is the history of freedom, it is as the enemy of freedom that Calvin

especially reviled by him. He says, "... [Calvin] condemned all rebellion on the part of his friends, so long as there were great doubts of their success. His principles, however, were often stronger than his exhortations, and he had difficulty in preventing murders and seditious movements in France. When he was dead, nobody prevented them, and it became clear that his system, by subjecting the civil power to the service of religion, was more dangerous to toleration than Luther's plan of giving to the State supremacy over the Church." This erudite man would have known that Calvinists never controlled the French "civil power," that the civil power served religion precisely in destroying Calvinists, just as it had always served religion in destroying heretics and dissenters.

Acton was an English Catholic reared in Italy. His mother and wife and a significant part of his education were German. He was the student and friend of Johann von Döllinger, a Munich professor and church historian famous for his attacks on the papacy, which were occasioned by the promulgation of the doctrine of papal infallibility in 1870. Acton also strongly opposed this doctrine, though he did not leave the church, as Döllinger did, to join the Old Catholic movement which arose in Germany at that time. He did, however, end the publication of an important English Catholic journal, which he edited, rather than accede to the claim of the church that Catholic writers must be governed by its views and teaching. Döllinger, who trained Acton in new German historical methods, was the author of books on Luther and the Protestant Reformation which are said to be very severe. Aside from the direct influence of Döllinger's work on Acton, the fact that both of them were vehemently critical of their own church might have predisposed them to emphasize their ultimate loyalty by engaging in still more vehement criticism of other churches. Acton wrote to William Gladstone, hyperbolically, that in the Catholic church "[w]e have to meet an organized conspiracy to establish a power which would be the most formidable enemy of liberty as well as of science throughout the world." To be worse than this, the other traditions would have to have been very bad indeed.

I suspect Acton's influence may be reflected at least indirectly in Jonathan Israel's *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1407–1806* (1995). In his discussion of the Dutch War of Independence from Spain, Israel says:

'Freedom' was adopted by William the Silent and his propagandists as the central justifying principle of the Revolt against Spain. In his manifestos of 1568, explaining his taking up arms against the legitimate ruler of the Netherlands, William referred, on the one hand, to the Spanish king's violation of the 'freedoms and privileges' of the provinces, using 'freedom' in this restricted sense; but he also claimed to be the defender of 'freedom' in the abstract, in the modern sense. He maintained that the people had 'enjoyed freedom in former times' but were now being reduced to 'unbearable slavery' by the king of Spain.

Though Calvinism played a decisive role in the origins and history of the Dutch Republic, no work of Calvin's appears in Israel's bibliography. Presumably he is unaware that he has described precisely the kind of revolt justified by Calvin in the passage from the *Institutes* quoted above. He attributes to Calvinism the influence of "clear doctrines," but it seems not to have occurred to him to wonder what the content of those doctrines might have been. But the shadow of presumed Calvinist illiberalism — Acton says "the order it defended or sought to establish was never legitimate or free" — hovers over

his interpretation of the culture of the Republic. The point is made repeatedly that the famous liberalism of the Dutch had its dark side — on one hand, women may have enjoyed unprecedented status, freedom of movement, and autonomy, but, on the other hand, prostitution was suppressed. It seems we are always obliged to choose our poison.

Simon Schama, in *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (1988) also assumes Calvinist illiberalism, and assigns the enlightened aspects of the culture to other influences. He says, for example, “Calvinist suspicions and anxieties did not ... monopolize the cultural response to Jews and Judaica. Humanist scholars, many of whom were busy reviving Hebrew as one of the three indispensable classical languages, were capable of softening the divisions between one faith and another in the interests of scholarly community.” He would have learned from close acquaintance with the history of the Reformation period that the study of Hebrew was a religious and especially a Calvinist discipline. It was Calvin himself who instituted the study of the three languages in the academy that he established for the training of clergy in Geneva years before there was a Dutch Republic. Ministers educated in his tradition studied Hebrew as a part of their training until the middle of the present century. Schama’s characterization of the Calvinist view of the Old Testament is thoroughly misinformed, nor is there any sign elsewhere of acquaintance with the theology. No work of Calvin’s is listed in his bibliography.

Acton’s influence is very visible in the work of the prolific American religious historian Roland H. Bainton. In an essay titled “Protestant Persecutors,” published in 1935, his nine-page discussion of Calvin is fortified, to all appearances, by sixty-eight footnotes, almost all of them simply citations of volume and page numbers in the *Calvini Opera*, the forbidding nineteenth-century Swiss edition of his complete works in the original Latin and French. By comparison, Acton seems tenderly solicitous of the reader. Of the three discussions of Calvin in English cited by Bainton, one is an article of his own and another is Acton’s *History of Freedom*. Almost all the rest are in German, which tends to disguise the fact that Calvinism has had a long and uniquely significant history in English-language culture and theology, reflected not least in the availability of translations of most of the texts Bainton refers to. Bainton is writing for Americans, who then still included the largest concentration of Calvinists ever to exist on earth, as he would have known, being himself a Congregationalist. Yet he writes as if he were describing a theology and an ethos not only wholly alien to them but also beyond their competence, over their heads. This Duke-and-the-Dauphin style of scholarship is really very funny. We can see in it the importance of the persistence of yokelism among us, and of our ever unbridled deference in the face of pretension.

Bear in mind that Calvin approved the execution of *only one man* for heresy, the Spanish physician known as Michael Servetus, who had written books in which, among other things, he attacked the doctrine of the Trinity. One man is one too many, of course, but by the standards of the time, and considering Calvin’s embattled situation, the fact that he has only Servetus to answer for is evidence of astonishing restraint. Consider Luther and the Peasants’ War. Consider the Inquisition. Out of this anomaly, this one execution, has come all the writing about Calvin’s zeal for persecution, till he above

all others is associated with it. Bainton says, “Calvin brought Protestant persecution to a head. He began where Luther left off. Euphemisms disappeared. Calvin did not pretend that persecution is no constraint of conscience. He did not worry about any conscience save his own which compelled him to vindicate the divine majesty.” He continues, “Heresy was for him, as for the Middle Ages, a sin against Christendom ... He felt as keenly as Augustine the sin of schism and could not but regard heresy as an offense against Christian society.” But Bainton offers no evidence that anyone else took another view. “Heresy” is, after all, a word freighted with just such assumptions.

Geneva in the time of Calvin had in fact reformed its laws so that religious infractions could not receive a penalty harsher than banishment. Servetus came there perhaps for this reason, having escaped from imprisonment by the Inquisition in Vienne. (Oddly, this escape is one of the things he was charged with in Geneva.) Then the Genevans broke their own law by trying and burning him. Disheartening as that fact is, it nevertheless indicates that Calvinist Geneva was eschewing a practice which was, and for centuries had been, commonplace all over Europe — as Geneva was well aware since their coreligionists elsewhere were chief among those being burned.

Bainton sees Calvin’s use of the Old Testament as a device for evading the Sermon on the Mount — “The gentle Savior who said, ‘Love your enemies’ was prefigured by David, who sang ‘Do I not hate them, O Lord, that hate Thee?’” Bainton says, “This resort to the Old Testament necessitates also a picture of God as ruthless and arbitrary ... In the service of such a God we must crush all considerations of humanity.” This is, of course, Bainton’s reading of the Old Testament, certainly not Calvin’s, and it is an alarmingly hostile one. Calvin wrote a commentary on Psalm 139, the psalm which Bainton quotes here. In it he says, “We are to observe ... that the hatred of which the Psalmist speaks is directed to the sins rather than the persons of the wicked. We are, so far as in us lies, to study peace with all men; we are to seek the good of all, and, if possible, they are to be reclaimed by kindness and good offices: only so far as they are enemies to God we must strenuously confront their resentment.” He says, “David’s example should teach us to rise with a lofty and bold spirit above all regard to the enmity of the wicked, when the question concerns the honour of God, and rather to renounce all earthly friendships than falsely pander with flattery to the favour of those who do everything to draw down upon themselves the divine displeasure.” Surely it is fair to wonder why Bainton did not consult the *Calvini Opera* before denouncing Calvin’s bloody-mindedness. A better scholar would certainly have known that this verse was not traditionally taken to “crush all considerations of humanity.” Augustine wrote a gloss on the psalm also. He takes David to mean, “I hated in them their iniquities, I loved Thy creation. This it is to hate with a perfect hatred, that neither on account of the vices thou hate the men, nor on account of the men love the vices.”

Bainton does note that Calvin would not countenance the breaking of icons, an excess sometimes engaged in by people who claimed his influence. He notes that Calvin restrained the Comte de Coligny, a powerful supporter in France, from acting to defend the Protestants there by saying, “Better that we should perish a hundred times than that the name of Christianity and the Gospel should be subject to such a reproach.” Yet he says, “If Calvin ever wrote anything in favor of religious liberty



was a typographical error,” like Acton, offering no instance of his supposed frothing intolerance except the trial and execution of Michael Servetus.

Acton worked free of what might seem to be the commonsense connection between the tendency of a theology to encourage persecution and the actual numbers of the victims of its agents and enthusiasts. Historically speaking, this is a nonsensical way to proceed. I suspect it has its origins not in comparative religion — if either Acton or Bainton were competent to make meaningful comparisons, they were not inclined to make them — but in those new German historical methods that were so influential at the time. Max Weber, perhaps the most effectively dismissive of all the writers on Calvinism, was another exponent of these new methods. His *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* associated Calvinism with a joyless, ascetic acquisitiveness, which, so long as it had its basis in theology, reflected anxiety about one’s salvation, and, when it lost its religious rationality, outlived it joylessly, making of modern life an iron cage, an insupportable tedium. Weber allows that there has been capitalism since Babylon. In his view Calvinists did not invent it, but they accelerated its development. They created its modern *spirit* with their asceticism, their anxiety for worldly proof of divine favor, their adaptation of Luther’s concept of vocation to create a powerful work ethic (Curiously, Weber ranks beside these influences certain advances in methods of bookkeeping.) His proof of a special relationship between Calvinists and capitalism was that in Germany, at the time he wrote, Calvinists were more prosperous than Lutherans and Catholics, and were overrepresented in the universities and the professions. A yet more brilliant sociologist might have found other possible explanations for these facts.

By comparison with Lutherans, Calvinists lack *gemütlichkeit* — they are not good fellows. Weber says you can see this in their faces. This is the new historical method. This is how *spirit* becomes a term suitable for use in economic analysis. I suppose I am unfair in saying that for Weber a prejudice is a proof. He offers none of the usual criticisms of capitalism in itself — that it is exploitive, that it is crisis prone, that it creates extremes of wealth and poverty. His criticism is that, in its “modern” form, those who prosper from it do not enjoy their prosperity. He knows and says that Calvin did not encourage the accumulation of wealth, and that he insisted the “church” — in this sense, the elect — do not prosper in this world. He does what Acton does. They both argue that a social group defined by them as the people who adhere to or have been acculturated by a particular theology, are, with a generalizable and world-historical consistency, peculiarly inclined to behave in ways precisely contrary to the teaching of that theology — tolerantly, in Acton’s case (though he would never acknowledge that, in practical terms, a relative disinclination to persecute does equal tolerance), and in Weber’s case, acquisitively and in the manner of those attempting to achieve salvation by works — the very thing Calvin strove most ardently to discourage. For Acton, the supposed spirit of the theology makes the actual conduct of Calvinists in the world of no account. For Weber, the supposed spirit in which they act in the world makes the theology of no account. Surely it is fair to wonder if any of this amounts to more than personal animus — which was the preferred historical method of so much of the Western world at the beginning of this bitter century.

I know Weber's book has been long and widely thought to merit respect. Try as I may, I can find no grounds for this view of it. (He, like Acton, is said to have been spectacularly learned. He wrote analyses of the ethics and social forms of Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and ancient Judaism. But then, if he used the *gemütlichkeit* method, he may have found this fairly light work.) In fairness to Weber, he considered his conclusions in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* to be merely tentative, likely to be superseded when "comparative racial neurology and psychology shall have progressed beyond their present and in many ways very promising beginnings."

In these essays I consider questions that influence, or are influenced by, the way we think about the past, and therefore the present and the future. Cynicism has its proof texts. An important historical "proof" very current among us now is that Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence unconscious of the irony of the existence of slavery in his land of equality. The most ordinary curiosity would be a sufficient antidote to the error of imagining that Jefferson was such a knave or fool as this notion implies. Jefferson attacked slavery as a terrible crime in the first draft of the Declaration, in which he said of the English king:

He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of INFIDEL powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or restrain this execrable commerce.

The passage was edited out before the document was approved, and published by Jefferson in his autobiography, with the remark that its excision was owed to the pusillanimity of the Congress, who feared offending friends in England. If those interested in Jefferson's thought were interested enough to look at what he wrote, they would find the powerful attack on slavery in his *Notes on Virginia*, and more elsewhere to the same effect. Granting the difficulties of the question, it is surely useful to be in mind that Jefferson, in the Declaration of Independence, did explicitly assert the "sacred rights of life and liberty" of the enslaved people, as an aspect of their human nature. Now he and his period are undergoing aggressive reinterpretation on the grounds that they lacked just this insight, to the disparagement of ideals we once found moving and useful. All this occurs on the strength of a seemingly universal ignorance of important and accessible fact, an ignorance which blossoms into quasi-scholarship and seeds the wind. How are we to read someone capable of such gross blindness and hypocrisy as Jefferson must have been? With hostility or condescension, or not at all. More precisely, still not reading him, we will now regard him with ill-informed condescension rather than with our traditional ill-informed respect. This change is already palpable and full of consequence. A honorable ideal sounds to us now like patent self-deceit, like the language of complacent oppression.

Surely it is fair to ask what benefit justifies the polemical use of defective information. For it is characteristic of the long campaign of dysphemism otherwise known as the public discussion of American history that its tone is one of a moral superiority to its subject so very marked as to make any other view of a matter than the one that is most effectively dismissive — Thoreau

mother laundered his shirts. A complex view of history must necessarily reincorporate in it lovely and creditable things, simply because the record attests to them, as well as to venality and hypocrisy and vulgarity. It is clearly true that the reflex of disparagement is no more compatible with rigorous inquiry than the impulse to glorify. And it is simply priggish to treat ambiguity as a synonym for corruption.

Once, and for millennia, people painted human figures on their jars, carved them into their columns and gates, made pillars and pilasters of them, wove them into tapestries, painted domed heavens full of them, made paintings of them bent over books or dreaming at windows or taking their ease on the banks of rivers. Human figures decorated lamp stands and soup tureens and the spines of books. Now they seem never to be used decoratively, as things pleasing in themselves. Advertising uses them to part us from our money, implying that we should compare ourselves and our lot to the supposed acquirable condition of well-being these insinuating images represent to us. They are vendors and cadgers who, in their subtler way, only want to get a foot in the door. We defend ourselves from their appeal they have for us, just as, if they were flesh, we would resist, or take offense at, their earnest gaze and their firm handshake.

It seems to me that, when we lost our aesthetic pleasure in the human presence as a thing to be looked at and contemplated, at the same time we ceased to enjoy human act and gesture, which civilization has always before found to be beautiful even when it was also grievous or terrible, as the epics and tragedies and the grandest novels testify. Now when we read history, increasingly we read it as a record of cynicism and manipulation. We assume that nothing is what it appears to be, that it is less and worse, insofar as it might once have seemed worthy of respectful interest. We routinely disqualify testimony that would plead for extenuation. That is, we are so persuaded of the rightness of our judgment as to invalidate evidence that does not confirm us in it. Nothing that deserves to be called truth could ever be arrived at by such means. If truth in this sense is essentially inaccessible in any case, that should only confirm us in humility and awe.

AMERICAN CULTURE has entered a period in which atavism looks to us for all the world like progress. The stripping away of humane constraints to liberate great “natural” forces, such as capital flow or the (*soi-disant*) free market, has acquired such heady momentum that no one even pauses to wonder whether such forces are indeed particularly “natural.” The use of the word implies a tendentious distinction. Billions of dollars can vanish into the ether under the fingers of a bad young man with a dark stare, yet economics is to be regarded as if it were lawful and ineluctable as gravity. If the arcane, rootless, disruptive phenomenon we call global economics is natural, then surely anything else is, too.

Rivers flow to the sea — this fact implies no obligation on our part to abet them in it, to eliminate meanders and flood plains. If economics were natural in this sense, presumably moderating and stabilizing mechanisms would be intrinsic to its systems. But economics is simply human traffic, what people make and do and value and need, or think they need, a kind of epitome of civilization. It is the wealth of nations, and also their fraudulence and malice and vainglory. It is no more reliable, benign or rational than any other human undertaking. That is to say, it requires conscious choice and control, the making of moral and ethical judgments.

Primitive, sometimes called classical, economics has long lived symbiotically with Darwinism, which sprang from it. Darwinists have always claimed that they were simple scientists, pursuing truth even in the face of outrage and rejection, even at the cost of dispelling myths upon which weaker souls preferred to remain dependent. It seems fair to allow that Darwinism might have evolved long enough on its own to have become another species of thought than the one in which it had its origins, though nature provides no analogy for change of that kind. Yet we find the recrudescence of primitive economics occurring alongside a new prominence of Darwinism. We find them separately and together encouraging faith in the value of self-interest and raw competition. Furthermore, we find them certain peculiar assumptions which are incompatible with their claims to being objective, freestanding systems. One is progressivism, which is implied everywhere in primitive economics, and denied everywhere in contemporary Darwinism.

The idea of progress implies a judgment of value. We are to believe the world will be better if people are forced into severe and continuous competition. If they work themselves weary making part for a gadget assembled on the other side of the earth, in fear of the loss of their livelihoods, the world will be better for it. If economic forces recombine and shed these workers for cheaper ones, the world will be still better. In what sense, better? To ask is to refuse to accept the supposedly inevitable. To deny the all-overriding reality of self-interest and raw competition, which will certainly overwhelm us if we allow ourselves some sentimental dream of a humane collective life. This economics implies progress and has no progress to show.

Contemporary Darwinism shuns the suggestion that the workings of natural selection are progressive, perhaps in resistance to the old error of assuming that humankind is the masterpiece

evolution. To do so would be to discover special value in peculiarly human attributes, to suggest, for example, that mind is something toward which evolution might have tended. That would be to legitimize the works of the mind, its most characteristic intuitions, concerning, for example, ethics and religion. Yet we are told by Darwinists to celebrate the wondrous works of natural selection, the tangled bank. Its authority must be received, its truth made the measure of all truth, because heaven and earth are full of its glory. To claim creation as the signature act of whatever power one prefers is clearly to overstep the bounds of scientific discourse. The intention is to demonstrate that there are emotional satisfactions in this worldview, which is at least to acknowledge the claims of our distinctively human longing. Characteristically, however, Darwinists, like primitive economists, assume that what is humane — I use the word here, unexceptionably, as I believe, to mean whatever arises from the desire to mitigate competition and to put aside self-interest — is unnatural, and therefore wrong.

The debate between Darwinism and religion is and has always been very strange. I wish to make a distinction here between evolution, the change that occurs in organisms over time, and Darwinism, the interpretation of this phenomenon which claims to refute religion and to imply a personal and social ethic which is, not coincidentally, antithetical to the assumptions imposed and authorized by Judaism and Christianity. Darwin's theory was published in 1859, two years before the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln. His achievement would be impressive if even a tiny core of scientific insight survived such an explosion of new understanding of the nature of things as has occurred in the last century and a half. It is important to remember, however, that evolution as I have defined it was observed and noted even in antiquity. In 1850 Alfred Tennyson had published *In Memoriam*, the long poem in which he contemplates the dark implications of an evolutionary origin of man and creation, and arrives at a reconciliation of this theory with a new understanding of divine providence. In 1852 Matthew Arnold published "Empedocles on Etna," in which evolution is represented as exposing religion as mere human illusion. The tendency to confuse Darwin with Prometheus obscures the fact that his ideas, too, have an ancestry, and an evolution, and, most certainly, a genus.

What, precisely, this theory called Darwinism really is, is itself an interesting question. The popular shorthand version of it is "the survival of the fittest." This is a phrase coined by the so-called Social Darwinist, Herbert Spencer, in work published before the appearance of the *Origin of Species* and adopted — with acknowledgment of Spencer as the source — in later editions of Darwin's book. There is an apparent tautology in the phrase. Since Darwinian (and, of course, Spencerian) fitness is proved by survival, one could as well call the principle at work "the survival of survivors." This is not strictly speaking, tautological, if the point is to bless things as they are, insofar as they are a matter of life and death. (The words "competition" and "struggle" are grossly euphemistic, since what is being described in Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* [1798], the winnowing that inspired Darwin, was the withholding of very meager sustenance from those who would die without it. Nothing more heroic was called for than closing one's hand, or turning one's back, both of them familiar and congenial exercises in Darwin's time, and both of them what Spencer was commending

when he coined this phrase.)

If we are to take this notion of natural selection as a chaste, objectively functioning scientific principle, however, the issue of tautology is not so easily resolved. Since those who are alive tend to make up the majority of any population, one cannot really be surprised to find their traits predominant, and their offspring relatively numerous. At the same time, one cannot be sure that they have not found the broad path to extinction, like so many creatures before them, doomed by traits that cannot at this moment be called incompatible with their survival, given the fact of their survival. In other words, the theory understood in these terms is notably weak in its ability to generalize, describe, or predict. Life forms do change, and there is an orderliness in their existence over time, notably in the phenomenon of species, whose origins Darwin did not, in fact, explain, or even claim to have explained. That the drifting of the forms of life corresponds in significant ways to the drift of the content or configuration of their genetic endowment is not a fact whose meaning is self-evident. The change to be observed is change, not necessarily refinement or complication, and not even adaptation because it is often maladaptive. In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin notes, “Natural Selection acts on tentatively.” Behold the great Law that governs nature.

It appears to me that the conjunction which allowed evolution to flourish as Darwinism was the appropriation of certain canards about animal breeding for the purpose of social criticism, together with a weariness in European civilization with Christianity, which did cavil, if anything did, at the extraordinary cruelty of industrial and colonial civilization. Malthus wrote his *Essay on the Principle of Population* to demonstrate the harmful consequences of intervening between the poor and the death by starvation. In his *Autobiography*, Darwin says:

[In 1838] I happened to read for amusement [!] Malthus on *Population*, and being well prepared to appreciate the struggle for existence which everywhere goes on from long-continued observation of the habits of animals and plants, it at once struck me that under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved, and unfavourable ones to be destroyed. The result of this would be the formation of new species. Here, then, I had at last got a theory by which to work ...

It would appear he made Malthus's grim thesis, that alleviation of misery only results in greater misery, darker still by concluding that those who die deserve to, as the embodiments of unfavorable “variations.” In *The Descent of Man* he treats human fecklessness as atavism, and perhaps that is part of what he means here. But as a consequence of the progressive character of change brought about by the process of destruction he describes as occurring within and between populations, survival is always a function of *relative* fitness. There is no such thing as intrinsic worth. No value inheres in whatever is destroyed, or destructible. In *Origin of Species* he says:

In each well-stocked country natural selection acts through the competition of the inhabitants, and consequently leads to success in the battle for life, only in accordance with the standard of that particular country. Hence the inhabitants of one country, generally the smaller one, often yield to the inhabitants of another and generally the larger country. For in the larger country there will have existed more individuals and more diversified forms, and the competition will have been severer, and thus the standard of perfection will have been rendered higher.

Those who have wondered how it can be that larger countries so consistently dominate smaller ones will find their answer here — bigger countries have better people in them. Insights like this must have sweetened the pill of Darwinism considerably for those among the British who felt any doubts about the glory of Empire. Especially to be noted is the progressivist spin Darwin puts on Malthus. A more populous country implies for him one in which there is more severe attrition, therefore a more highly evolved people. That is to say, success depends not on numbers but on the severity of competition that is the presumed consequence of large population. Brutal conditions at home legitimize domination abroad. Surely this is the worst of all possible worlds. But my point here is that the idea of progressive evolution through natural selection occurred to Darwin as a consequence of reading about endemic starvation in the populations of wealthy countries. He elaborated it into a theory of national aggression.

If Darwin retreated, in one context or another, from the assertion that there is in fact such a thing as progress in evolution among the plants and animals, he nevertheless consistently assumed that human beings were “perfected” by the struggle for survival. In *The Descent of Man* he makes quite clear what form this progress takes. He says:

At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world. At the same time the anthropomorphous apes ... will no doubt be exterminated. The break between man and his nearest allies will then be wider, for it will intervene between man in a more civilized state, as we may hope, even than the Caucasian, and some ape as low as a baboon, instead of as now between the negro or Australian and the gorilla.

Darwin speaks frequently about higher and lower races of man, and he also says that there is little difference in mind or temperament among the races of men. Mind is not a consideration for him, and this causes him no embarrassment. It is true of Darwinism in general that the human mind, and those of its creatures which are not compatible with the Darwinist worldview, are discounted as anomaly or delusion. Elsewhere Darwin remarks, with striking obduracy, “If man had not been his own classifier he would never have thought of founding a separate order for his own reception.” The fact that we alone are capable of describing order in nature is not a significant distinction in his view, but instead a source of error, even though the human brain is taxonomically singular, and should therefore set us apart if our sciences and civilizations did not. Darwin freely concedes to the savages (as to the ants) courage and loyalty and affection. He describes an anthropologist’s overhearing African mothers teaching their children to love the truth. These things do not affect the confidence with which Darwin assigns them to the condition of inferiority, which for him is proved by their liability to extermination by the civilized races.

In his useful book, *Darwinian Impacts: An Introduction to the Darwinian Revolution* (1980), D. Oldroyd, defending the phrase “survival of the fittest” from the charge that it is tautological, proposes that the reader “consider a simple case of natural selection arising from the struggle for existence.” This is the “struggle” that led to the extermination of the native people of Tasmania by European settlers in the nineteenth century. “One group (to their lasting *moral*, but not biological shame) survived; another

group failed to survive. Surely it is perfectly clear that this may be explained in terms of some criterion of fitness (say the possession of fire-arms) that is quite separate from the *contingent* fact that the Europeans *did* survive. Thus we can readily see this example as an empirical exemplification of the principle of natural selection or the survival of the fittest.” He goes on to discuss the change in coloration of the English peppered moth, omitting to provide the list of contributions made by Anglo-Tasmanians to global well-being which might assuage our doubts about the persuasive force of this simple case, this systematic destruction of unarmed people. Darwinism is, intrinsically, a chilling doctrine.

Rejection of religion was abroad in Europe in the nineteenth century, just as evolution was. Ludwig Feuerbach and Friedrich Nietzsche are two noted debunkers who flourished in Darwin's lifetime, and Karl Marx is another. Marx, the gentlest of them, said, “*Religious* suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.” Whether the protest against suffering makes suffering harder to relieve, as Marx argues, or simply makes it harder to ignore, weariness with the sigh of the oppressed creature is easy to document in the thought of the time, and the mode or avenue of such sentiment was religion.

Whether Darwin himself intended to debunk religion is not a matter of importance, since he was perceived to have done so by those who embraced his views. His theory, as science, is irrelevant to the question of the truth of religion. It is only as an inversion of Christian ethicalism that it truly engaged religion. And in those terms it is appropriately the subject of challenge from any humane perspective, religious or other. Insofar as ethical implications are claimed for it, it is not science, yet historically it has sheltered under the immunities granted to science. The churches generally have accepted the idea of evolution with great and understandable calm. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or of Luther, Calvin, and Ignatius of Loyola, or of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Simone Weil, and Martin Luther King, is not a Watchmaker. To find him at the end of even the longest chain of being or causality would be to discover that he was a thing (however majestic) among things. Not God, in other words. Daniel Dennett's *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995) declares from its irksomely alliterative title onward that the complex of assertions I have described as Darwinism is vigorously alive. Dennett asks, “If God created and designed all these wonderful things, who created God? Supergod? And who created Supergod? Superdupergod? Or did God create himself? Was it hard work? Did it take time?” This is my point precisely. It is manifestly not consistent with the nature of God to be accessible to description in such terms. Even Dennett, who appears to have no meaningful acquaintance with religious thought, is clearly aware that to speak of God in this way is absurd.

If one looks at the creation narrative in Genesis one finds no Watchmaker, as the Darwinists would have us believe, but a God who stands outside his creation, and calls it into being by, in effect, willing its existence. This terse account does as little to invoke the model of a human artisan as it could do. The creation and blessing of everything, from light to the great sea creatures to whatever creeps on the earth, is done in the same formulaic terms. It all has the same origin, and it is all good. There is no



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