

## FANATICAL BELIEF

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This paper reports on work in progress on the topic of belief and beliefs, especially beliefs as they are held by religious extremists. It also reports on the motivation for this work. Discussions of motivation do not always, in fact they hardly ever, form part of philosophical discourse, and there's a sense in which they won't here either, if "philosophical discourse" is construed narrowly. The arguments to be presented would stand up just as well under critical challenge if their motivation were not known. By avowing at the outset the source of my interest in the topic I run a certain risk, because people who don't like the arguments may be tempted to dismiss them by saying "ah! that's what he has against belief!" But the impulse (not to say obligation) that I feel to acknowledge the personal context of the paper operates on two different levels. In philosophy as in literature the genetic fallacy seems to me not wholly fallacious; we might learn a lot from attending to what drives inquiry, though most philosophers don't seem to be too interested in learning it.<sup>1</sup> And my confessional beginning buys me a strategic opportunity for later on, when I shall want to say that some other apparently technical philosophical discourse about belief has motivations that ought themselves to be brought into the discursive arena.

I grew up among believers; I was one, or counted as one, for the first couple of decades of my life. In that culture, and until recently in this, it was hardly necessary to ask: believers in what? Believers were saved by the Blood of the Lamb, unbelievers mocked and scoffed. The

very idea of unbelief awed and troubled me in early youth - what would it be like not to have the assurance of salvation? It was related to the idea of apostasy, a standing aside from the truth, standing outside, where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth. It was all too frightening to contemplate.

I find myself now an unbeliever with respect to all beliefs (though without a trace of mockery); an infidel with respect to all faiths; an apostate from every stance. No, that is too strong: there are some things I believe, some people in whom I have faith, some stands I am prepared to take against odds, but these do not count when measured by the exigent standards of my youth. They are too reflective, too reserved, too idiosyncratic, too human, too personal. The beliefs that seemed so much a part of my earlier self were not suddenly refuted by any particular experience; they fell away naturally - though not without plenty of soul-searching - as I adventured out into a world I had been assured would be cold and empty but in which I found more warmth and nourishment than ever among the faithful. In our age this is a familiar trajectory,<sup>2</sup> though as Lytton Strachey notes it does not have the same outcome in all cases. He recounts that

James Anthony [Froude], together with Arthur Hugh Clough, went through an experience which was more distressing in those days than it has since become; they lost their faith. With this difference, however, that while in Froude's case the loss of his faith turned out to be rather like the loss of a heavy portmanteau, which one afterwards discovers to have been full of old rags and brickbats, Clough was made so uneasy by the loss of his that he went on looking for it everywhere as long as he lived ....<sup>3</sup>

It is not my purpose here to chronicle my own liberation from belief, though liberation it certainly was, following Froude's pattern rather than Clough's - and liberation furthermore not just from a particular set of beliefs but from the need for belief in general. Nor am I primarily concerned to make confession of the commitments that replaced it - some of them will be obvious enough. But I have been looking back, lately, at my younger self and at the doctrinal web in which he was enmeshed, wondering how it was possible to believe all that, or any of it, or anything like it, how anybody came to do so, why doing so mattered so much, and matters still to millions of my contemporaries.

For beliefs, as everyone knows, have consequences, sometimes merely private, sometimes of tremendous public import. What is called the "religious right" is driven by belief. Clashes of belief tear nations and regions apart; belief comes armed, and brings destruction. There are zealots even in more peaceable societies who continually make trouble with their beliefs - we have only to think, in our own, of a sizeable group of people whose beliefs about the status of the human zygote serve them as a justification for murder. In my own case the consequences of belief were painful, though neither fatal nor world-shaking. What happened was this: when I told my parents that I no longer shared their beliefs, and as their own beliefs hardened, the point came when they refused to see me, for the rest of their lives, which were long. Treatment like this concentrates the mind, even retrospectively. I cared about them, and continued to do so until their respective deaths, but the wall they put up could not, in spite of repeated attempts, be scaled. They had known me since birth and had seen me, approvingly enough, for what I was, but what they could not know and had not seen outweighed it all. That is what, as a father now myself, I find unthinkable, and it is part of what has stimulated this

inquiry.

No doubt my parents felt themselves as hurt by this separation as I was. Indeed I suspect that the thought that I might be hurt by it at all never entered their heads: stiff necks don't go with sensitive feelings, any more than stiff upper lips do, and stiff-necked was what I was taken to be. They saw me as having initiated the break; it was I whose beliefs had changed, after all, not they. They were disappointed and affronted, on God's behalf but also on their own. They were anxious about my spiritual welfare, and tormented by the thought that, had they been more faithful stewards, I might have been saved. But they could accept their pain as a gift to God, they had the support of their Brethren (they were Exclusive Brethren, a group the members of which were accustomed to referring to one another as "saints"), they had been warned that families might have to be broken for the Lord's sake. "He that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me"<sup>4</sup> (the words of a man who had neither son nor daughter). I on the other hand had wilfully followed my own way, I had only myself to blame. Sometimes I still feel it. It is not the sort of thing that lifts easily.

I found my way into philosophy for other reasons, but the problem of belief in general, and the problem of religious belief in particular, has always been, at least in prospect, on my philosophical agenda. I had left England for America, as the pilgrims had before me, for freedom of belief, or from it; for years I enjoyed the freedom without thinking back too much on what it had freed me from. On returning to England in 1993-94 for my first long stay in forty years a preoccupation began to surface. It was fed by coincidences, professional and personal, for which there is no room in this account, though in a fuller and even more frankly autobiographical treatment they would have to be dealt with. But it led me back to a new

interest in an old familiar, with whom I am still only beginning to grapple.

My parents' beliefs were not their own. When considered closely, hardly anyone's are. Most believers don't learn what they believe from experience, they learn it from one another (there is work to be done on the epidemiology of belief). My parents had swallowed their beliefs whole, my father while growing up among the Brethren, my mother as she joined them. Who were the Exclusive Brethren, and where did they get their beliefs? As it happens, there is a straightforward answer to this last question: they got them from a dissenting Anglo-Irish clergyman called John Nelson Darby.

The Exclusive Brethren constituted (constitute, indeed - but that's a long story) one of the more fanatical branches of a family of evangelical sects whose common ancestor was a group formed in Dublin in 1830, and organized in Plymouth soon afterwards under Darby's spiritual leadership. The history of the Plymouth Brethren was from the beginning one of division. Given a doctrine whose leading concept was that of "separation" (as in St. Paul's admonition to the Corinthians: "come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing"<sup>5</sup>) this fragmentation is not surprising. Darby - whom I still think of, after the fashion of the Brethren, as "JND," an expression whose other sense as "just noticeable difference" in experimental psychology conveys nicely if accidentally the hairsplitting on which many of these historical divisions rested - left the Church of Ireland after having become convinced that the priesthood as an institution was wicked in itself, usurping as it did the mediating role of the Holy Spirit between God the Father and human believers, in the (temporary) absence of Christ, the Son. He recorded this conviction in a tract entitled "The Notion of a Clergyman Dispensationally the Sin Against the Holy Ghost," thus solving the

problem of the nature of that offense, the Unforgivable Sin whose very possibility used to drive hypersensitive consciences to despair (what if one had inadvertently committed it?), by equating it with the taking of Holy Orders.

Now the thoughts of founders of splinter sects among fundamentalists do not usually command philosophical interest. But Darby's, as I have belatedly discovered, do. He was a man of powerful intellect but deeply repressed feeling - except where his Lord Jesus was concerned. About Jesus he was shamelessly and lamentably sentimental, and some of the "spiritual songs" he wrote reach astonishing heights of bathos, to coin an oxymoron thoroughly suitable to the subject. But in argument, which fills half a dozen volumes of his *Collected Writings* (there are thirty-four volumes in all, most of the rest consisting of exegesis and exhortation), he turns out to be a force to be reckoned with. I became aware of this when I discovered in the library of a former Exclusive Brother the volume of Darby's writings that contained his hundred-page commentary on Mill's *System of Logic* - a magnificently impatient and dismissive text, tearing Mill to shreds, for the most part unsuccessfully but with a kind of vigor that compelled attention. Darby obviously read - reluctantly it seems (his own comment was "I read one good book and have to read many bad books") - a good deal of what was going on around him, and conducted a one-man campaign against it.

When one considers his life - though tantalizingly little is known about its details - the existence of this body of writing is not entirely surprising. Two things stand out about the life: intellectual precocity and doctrinal charisma. Darby entered Trinity College Dublin at the age of fourteen and took his degree at the age of nineteen as Classical Medallist. He was called to the Irish Bar and practiced until conscience drove him into the Church, where as a curate in

County Wicklow he lived a life of asceticism and service that earned him the genuine affection of the mountain people among whom he worked. But there was working in him what he would have considered the movement of the Holy Spirit but what can I think be recognized as the passion of a man committed to ideals at once of belief and of consistency. Where he got these ideals is a puzzle, but once he had them he pursued them single-mindedly and sometimes ferociously. It is not every country curate who would write and publish an open letter to his Archbishop on a matter of church policy, but that is what Darby did when the Archbishop of Dublin petitioned Parliament for protection of his clergy, Darby included, from the attacks of marauding Catholics. To appeal to secular authority for any favor in carrying out the Lord's work seemed to Darby a dereliction of principle, and it was one of the things that led to his leaving the Church for a life of roving ministry among the Brethren. For the next fifty years he guided the movement, at first triumphantly, as it blossomed in England, in Switzerland (where for a while Darby was a figure of public controversy), in France, in Germany, in the United States.

It is clear that Darby considered himself to have an apostolic calling. Consider the salutation in the very first entry in the *Letters of J. N. Darby*: "Dearest Brethren and Sisters: Grace and peace be to you, and mercy from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>6</sup> This is not the normal language of an educated Anglo-Irishman of the early nineteenth century; it is lifted straight out of the epistles to the Corinthians, the Galatians and the rest. Darby was thirty-one when he wrote this epistle to the Brethren in Plymouth; he was already the acknowledged spiritual leader of a rapidly-expanding movement that looked for a time as if it would be a genuine force in ecclesiastical history. But he also presided over a series of

catastrophic splits in the nascent church. The Brethren movement had lasted less than twenty years when the great Bethesda division - named after the chapel in Bristol where it came to a head - separated the Darbyites, who became Closed or Exclusive Brethren, from the followers of the popular preacher George Müller, subsequently known as Open Brethren. The principle at stake in this division was tainted by association. Müller was willing to welcome believers at face value, as it were, without inquiring too closely into their attitude to the doctrinal aberrations of third parties; Darby insisted that failure to denounce and separate from error - in particular the error of his rival in Plymouth, Benjamin Wills Newton - constituted grounds for exclusion even if the error was not shared. This was a pattern that continued, as one occasion after another arose for the exercise of the trenchant and intolerant fanaticism of this extraordinary man.

Darby intrigues, even obsesses me; I didn't mean to put as much of him into this paper as I have. I'm not through with his thirty-four volumes, to which have to be added the letters and other miscellanea, and I expect to be pursuing him for some time. He is not the main focus of my attention here. But I think of him as the Arch-Believer, and something about the way he held his beliefs offers a challenge to philosophical theory.

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I turn then in the direction of my title: first belief, then fanaticism. What is a belief anyway? Here I switch gears into a more analytic mode. I take belief to involve an intentional relation between a believing subject and an object of belief, where "object" is construed broadly to include persons and states of affairs as well as propositions. Some obviously distinct belief situations suggest themselves at once:

(1) S believes that p, where p is a proposition or state of affairs;

- (1a) S believes 'p,' where 'p' is a statement;
- (2) S believes A, where A is a person, which means either
  - (i) A has just said something and S believes it (the weaker sense), or
  - (ii) S believes everything A says (the stronger sense);
- (2a) S believes [A when he or she says] 'p';
- (3) S believes in A, where A is a person;
- (4) S believes in X, where X is a principle, theory, value etc.

Of these (1) and (1a) have provoked a large literature, much of it recent, some of which will be touched on below; their apparent simplicity conceals a host of semantic problems, but for the moment I will assume them to have straightforwardly understood meanings. (2a) is a special case of (1a) that will be important later on. The propositions (1) through (4) can themselves take truth-values. If true they are psychological truths about S, but they don't tell us anything about the epistemic status of what S believes. For assertions about belief function modally in relation to assertions believed, so the truth of (1), S believes that p, will be independent of the truth of 'p,' the sentence that expresses p: S can quite well believe that p even if p is not the case. Similarly for the other examples: S can have the beliefs in question even though in (2) what A says is false, in (3) A is unworthy of trust, in (4) X is wrong.

In view of this formal disconnection between the truth of belief-statements and the truth or trustworthiness or rightness of what is believed it might seem that belief is of merely psychological interest. True, it has no independent epistemology, but there remain enough questions of pragmatics and methodology and ordinary language to keep philosophers busy, and the psychology is of philosophical interest too: it turns out to be quite difficult to separate

psychological issues of belief from philosophical ones.

I begin with an observation about the language of belief in use. Without commenting on the adequacy, or the difficulties, of the definition of knowledge as justified true belief, I shall assume a conceptual connection between belief and knowledge, and shall further assume unproblematic meanings for the assertion

(5) I know that p

and its opposite. Knowledge I take to be an ability, the ability to say what is true (reliable, acceptable) about what is known.<sup>7</sup> A similar analysis would construe belief as a disposition to treat the object of belief as true or trustworthy. Now in ordinary discourse, when someone says

(6) I believe that p,

it generally turns out that one of two very different things is meant. (6) usually means either

(7) p is the sort of thing that can be known, but I am not sure of it, or

(8) p is not the sort of thing that can be known, and I *am* sure of it.

(7) is unproblematic, though it comes in different versions depending on whether the source of my uncertainty is, for example, my own memory or the reliability of some other source of knowledge. It is (8) that is the really interesting case.

It looks as though the disposition that constitutes belief rests, in an important class of cases, less on assessing the truth of some proposition or the trustworthiness of some person than on being committed to it independently of any assessment. This would explain the rather different view we take of changes in belief in the two cases. Whereas in cases like (7) - which account for the greater part of the use of belief language in everyday discourse - everyone is content with the provisional status of the believer's relation to what is believed, so that rapid and

almost casual changes of belief are tolerated and understood, the same courtesy is not extended in cases like (8). We don't expect people to change their commitments casually and we don't respect them when they do.

I am tempted to call these two very different types of belief "belief<sub>1</sub>" and "belief<sub>2</sub>," but will avoid this appearance of technicality by adopting a convention that will, I think, not be far from the mark of ordinary usage. It is supported by two observations about beliefs and our habits of thought about them. The first involves a distinction between the way we treat the verb "to believe" and the way we treat the noun "belief." To repeat, the majority of cases of ordinary belief-language are cases like (7): for example, "I believe I left my keys on the dresser." But I'm not sure we want to elevate my thought of having left my keys on the dresser to the status of a *belief*. An "item of belief," perhaps, if I'm making a list of the things I'm sure of and the things I'm not, but not a full-fledged belief in its own right. I wouldn't be inclined to say, for example, that I'm a *believer* in having left my keys on the dresser.

The second observation is about the feelings that accompany, and in the view of some philosophers constitute, belief. Hume thought that a belief was "something felt by the mind, which distinguishes the idea of the judgment from the fictions of the imagination";<sup>8</sup> for him it seemed to be or to be accompanied by a kind of impression. We sometimes use just that language to convey our beliefs of the first kind: "I have the impression that I left my keys on the dresser" - that is, among all the places I might imagine I might have put them, that is the one that triggers the feeling of belief, the others are so many fictions. But in the case of what I am calling full-fledged beliefs the feeling must surely be qualitatively different; whatever the feeling that might accompany or constitute someone's belief in the existence of God, for example, it

would surely not be adequately captured by saying "I have the impression that God exists."

My own conviction - which will become clearer as we go along - is that it would be desirable to elevate as few things as possible to the status of beliefs in the full substantive sense of the term, and have those few be the objects of genuine commitment. So from now on whenever I use the word "belief" it will mean my belief<sub>2</sub>, the sort of thing I want to be sure of even though it's not the sort of thing that can be known, in the full sense of that term.

Now belief in the sense of commitment is a powerful conceptual tool, that can be used for good or ill. There are many propositions about us and the world we live in that are not susceptible to demonstration but whose validity is strongly felt: that events are causally interconnected, that we're free agents, that Nature is uniform and its laws trustworthy, that it would be better for everybody if everybody were thoughtful about what would be better for everybody. In some cases - the moral ones, rather than the natural-scientific ones - our commitment to the propositions in question may actually help them to be true. The existence of bodies of believers in democracy, in equal rights, in national liberation, in the preservation of the environment, has been crucial to advances made toward these goals.

What though of the status of the others? Do we want to get passionate about causality or freedom or the Uniformity of Nature as metaphysical truths? About causality Karl Popper had a suggestion that has always seemed to me admirable, and one that might be applied to cases like this generally. Don't waste time, he suggested in effect, worrying over causality as a metaphysical principle: treat it as a methodological rule.<sup>9</sup> That is, whenever you find a candidate for a causal explanation, look for one, and keep looking. If I adopt this stance my commitment to causal explanation is clear, and so is the practice that goes with it, but I feel less

inclined than formerly to say that I believe in causality. So this and similar areas of belief-language tend to wither away, and I find less and less point in proclaiming that something or other is a belief of mine. If someone challenges me: "Do you believe in free will?," I'll blink a bit and give some arguments, but the gist of my reply will be that I have no reason to think the opposite has been demonstrated (nor would I know what a demonstration would amount to, if the opposite were true), and that I go about my business as if what I do makes a difference in the world and as if I'm responsible for its consequences. "So you do believe in free will." All right, if you say so, but it's not a matter of great importance.

This leaves the believers in my second sense for whom their beliefs are matters of great importance, and they are the ones I have had in mind from the beginning as a target of criticism. However I don't want to fire away indiscriminately, so some further distinctions are in order. The reasons why beliefs matter very much most frequently have to do with the perceived status of their objects. Believers of the types already discussed tend to take the objects of their commitments as practically desirable on the moral side, as functionally true on the scientific side. The propositions believed operate hypothetically: if the world were constituted as we believe it to be, certain properties would be observed, and they are, so as long as counter-examples don't obtrude we'll go on as if it were so constituted; if people behaved in accordance with our belief, certain beneficial consequences would ensue, and they do, so as long as unexpected complications don't arise we'll go on urging people to behave in that way. The beliefs in question may be firmly held, but believers of this stripe tend also to be moderate, and tolerant of the beliefs of others; they will engage in reasoned discussion of the issues, they will try to be persuasive but won't be dogmatic.

Does this mean they aren't really committed, that their beliefs in the last analysis belong after all with (7) rather than (8)? Not necessarily: to be sure of something means to be settled about it in one's mind in an untroubled way ("sure" is from Latin *securus*, "free from care," *cura* being "care"), and it is surely possible to have this attitude to an object of belief without taking the step from personal confidence to global assertion. A pragmatic strategy for generating such an attitude, that can prevent cases like (8) from falling back to the level of cases like (7), or alternatively raise cases like (7) to the status of cases like (8), was adopted by Descartes as one of the maxims to be adhered to while the business of philosophical deconstruction and reconstruction went forward: "My second maxim was that of being as firm and resolute in my actions as I could be, and not to follow less faithfully opinions the most dubious, when my mind was once made up regarding them, than if these had been beyond doubt."<sup>10</sup> There seems to be nothing inconsistent in holding beliefs in this way, as long as one remembers the original dubiety of the opinions in question. (Of course the risk is that one will forget, and that firmness and resolution will harden into bigotry and fanaticism.)

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So far, although we are flirting with the irresponsibility of unfounded belief, things remain, if precariously, under control. We come now to those whose style of belief is of a very different order. The objects of their commitments are viewed as essential or as necessarily true, and the corresponding propositions function categorically: the world just is the way they believe it to be, people simply must behave in accordance with their beliefs. In other words their beliefs involve not merely a provisional or practical commitment but an ontological or deontological one. Beliefs of this sort are clung to fervently; their holders are touchy about them, they feel

personally threatened if the beliefs are attacked, even in abstract terms; they think it of the greatest importance that others should share their beliefs and that other beliefs should be shown to be erroneous, and thus tend to denounce and to evangelize; they seek the company of other believers and shun that of non-believers. By far the largest and most significant class of such beliefs are religious ones. Even passionate political beliefs tend to look and sound religious, as the history of communism demonstrates, and "religious fervor" has come to describe such excessive attachment to belief whatever its object.

It may perhaps be possible (I say perhaps because I have serious doubts on the point) to make a definite and assertive ontological or deontological commitment on a matter of religious belief, with the claim to universality that this must necessarily imply, without being threatened by, or entertaining feelings of superiority or hostility toward, or wishing to impose the belief upon, others who have made contradictory commitments. There is a fine line here between defensive self-satisfaction and genuine humility. Oliver Cromwell's plea, "I beseech you, brethren, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken," might serve as a test to determine on which side of this line someone lies: if you can think this you're on the side of humility, if you can't you're on the side of self-satisfaction. The question is whether anyone on the side of humility can really have made the ontological commitment, in the full sense of the term.

Self-satisfaction modulates readily into self-righteousness; the fine line, if we add further dimensionalities like time and group adherence, turns out to be a cusp. What provokes the passion and the polarization that manifest themselves in this contested territory of belief? To the bimodal character of ascriptions of belief as between the casual and the fervent I now add

another case of bimodality, uncannily (though not perhaps too obviously) related to it. It has to do with the derivatives in English of the Latin *fanum*, "temple," of which as far as I know there are only two, one having to do with what goes on in the temple and one having to do with what goes on outside it. The significant thing about them for my purposes is that their meanings get pushed to opposite extremes. What we might expect would be some contrast between the sacred and the secular, between ceremony and informality, between piety and worldliness. What we get is on the one hand "fanaticism" and on the other "profanity." It's like the believers and the mockers I began with: naturally it's the pious insiders who dismiss the outsiders and their probably innocent language as profane. It's the believers' interest in being as far inside as possible, and in putting the greatest possible distance between themselves and the unbelievers, that draws my critical attention.

Fanatical belief is exaggerated, enthusiastic, insistent belief. The satisfactions believers get from it now may not be altogether unrelated (though this will usually be by way of sublimation) to those the true temple fanatics got under the pagan deities: temples were occasionally sites of orgiastic frenzy in the service of the local god, in rites to which only the initiated were admitted (which perhaps accounted for some of the profanity of those outside). Certainly the satisfaction of belonging to an inside that is opposed to an outside plays a large role. Fanatics encourage one another in their opposition to the common threat, of infidelity or worldliness or whatever it may be, and they reinforce by ritual practices and even in daily conversation their attachment to the underlying belief.

In particular it is a characteristic mark of fanatical believers that they refuse to engage at

any serious level in the defense of their belief. They will preach it endlessly but will evade any line of questioning that might challenge the foundations. Quite simply, they can't afford to; fanatics can't allow themselves to think it possible that they might be mistaken. Winston Churchill's epigrammatic remark, that fanatics are people who can't change their minds and won't change the subject, is right on the first point at least. "Can't" of course is hyperbolic: they could, and some of them occasionally do, change their minds with surprising suddenness. This would not be surprising, though, under the hypothesis that one of the reasons for clinging to a fanatical belief may be an instability that needs to be shored up, so that if the credal support gives even a little it may collapse altogether. Such a view is lent weight by the observation that a lost fanatical belief is likely to be replaced by another just as fanatical: Saul of Tarsus, the fanatical anti-Christian, becomes Paul the Apostle, a fanatic for Christ, practically overnight.

The metastable condition of many fanatical beliefs may be one of the reasons for the characteristic inflexibility and defensiveness of the fanatic, the refusal to entertain the possibility of error or to test the vulnerability of the belief to rational argument. Now that I think of it, "rationalism" as I was growing up was a thoroughly pejorative term; it described the attitudes of all those irreverent German "higher critics" - a designation itself pronounced always with a mixture of derision and disapproval - who dared to bring scholarly analysis to bear on the sacred word. God forbid we should be rational in the discussion of our beliefs! The odd thing is that many fanatical believers - Darby is a perfect example - show an obsessive concern with rationality *within* the system of belief. As I indicated above, many of the disputes that split the Brethren movement turned on minute points of interpretation, that would sometimes be argued with great subtlety and sophistication. It is only the basic beliefs, whatever they happen to be,

that must be resistant to philosophical challenge.

Fanatics who allow themselves anywhere near such a challenge often use one of two strategies for blocking argument. The first is to say, repetitively, that the ground of their belief (to put it in slightly formal terms) is

(9) I believe p because 'p' is true.

And indeed if one knew something to be true that would seem at first sight a good reason to believe it. On inspection, however, there proves to be something wrong with this approach. *That it is true*, is what one believes; if one knew it to be true the belief would become redundant. Whatever tends to justify a belief will at the same time tend to justify the corresponding claim to truth, but the two are conceptually independent. The fact that I believe something doesn't make it true; and the fact that something is true can't be what makes me believe it, because I can't come to know that fact without having already believed it. There is no doubt a bootstrapping effect: I want to think it true, and in making the effort of belief it comes to seem true, which reinforces my tendency to think it true. Believers know and exploit this effect, which is described in the New Testament in the story of the child with the dumb spirit, whose father cried out "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."<sup>11</sup>

I will return to this business of wanting to believe, but turn now to the second of the fending-off strategies fanatics often use. This is to say

(10) I believe p because it is absurd (or impossible).

The force of this strategy is to deny reason any grip on the question whatever; the believer proudly or defiantly puts everything on the ground of faith. It is often thought that Tertullian was the author of this strategy, because of a notorious passage in his *De carne Christi*: "And the

Son of God died; it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd. And He was buried and rose again; the fact is certain, because it is impossible."<sup>12</sup> But there seems to be good reason to agree with R. H. Ayers when he suggests that Tertullian may only have been using a device from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Aristotle, in his discussion of enthymemes - that is, arguments with suppressed premises - lists the various "probative commonplaces" that may be supplied to complete an enthymematic argument, and says "Another [commonplace] refers to things which are supposed to happen and yet seem incredible. We may argue that people could not have believed them, if they had not been true or nearly true."<sup>13</sup> James Moffat, in commenting on this passage, says "We are invited to believe that if some statement is wildly improbable, it is more improbable still that anyone should have invented it; in other words, that it would never have been made ... unless there had been some evidence for it, and consequently that such evidence must be strong."<sup>14</sup> We still use exactly the same device, in discussing cases where "truth is stranger than fiction," when we say "nobody could possibly have made that up." This is admittedly a pretty risky move, one of the weaker points in Aristotle - no doubt people did and do argue like that, but they shouldn't have been encouraged to do so by leading philosophers of antiquity.

The strategy of believing because it is absurd or impossible does not however depend on Tertullian. It has an obvious appeal to those who want to mistrust human reason or claim that there are truths that go beyond it, who find satisfaction in yielding to mysteries, who feel somehow vindicated in otherwise humdrum intellectual lives by being admitted to the company of believers. In this no doubt lies some of the attraction that millions of readers of supermarket tabloids find in the occult; there's another world, not governed by the disappointingly ordinary

rules that hem us in in this one, a looking-glass world where the Red Queen can easily believe six impossible things before breakfast.<sup>15</sup> I do not mean to belittle this paradoxical aspect of belief; it has tempted some very serious thinkers, the most serious among them probably being Kierkegaard. But Kierkegaard is a special case, and we'll come back to him shortly.

There's more to be said on what strains belief, and on the desire on the part of believers to have their beliefs intact despite these strains. This desire, not to have to give up cherished beliefs, is obviously a powerful one. Intriguingly enough a hint of it is found in the very earliest occurrence of the idea of belief in Western thought. The word mainly used for belief or faith in the New Testament is *pistis*, and this can be traced back to one of those Greek words which stand at once for a concept and a divinity: *peitho*, to persuade, and Peitho the goddess of persuasion. No doubt yielding to Peitho had its rewards. The verb *peitho* usually meant - so the lexicon tells us - to persuade by fair means, to prevail upon by entreaty, but it had an underside too: to mislead, to "talk over" (as for example in being made an offer you can't refuse), to seduce. The general feeling one gets is of giving in, not altogether reluctantly perhaps, but not necessarily on the grounds of rational conviction either, not as a matter of informed consent.

The offer you can't refuse was not invented by the Mafia; it had been perfected long since by hellfire evangelism. Its most elegant form was given to it by Pascal, whose wager as you remember was designed to convince worldly friends who understood probabilities that belief was their best bet [see insert].

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insert (I can't manage the diagram here)

construct a 2 x 2 matrix (like a cross-section of a Battenberg cake); label the first column "God

exists” and the second column “God doesn’t exist,” the first row “I believe” and the second row “I don’t believe.” Pascal (roughly speaking - not always his own language) fills the resulting boxes as follows:

God exists and I believe = an infinity of an infinitely happy life

God doesn’t exist and I believe = minor inconveniences with worldly friends but the consolations of the church, so pretty much neutral

God exists and I don’t believe = eternal loss and damnation

God doesn’t exist and I don’t believe = no worries, neutral again.

Now - should I choose the belief column, with its possibility of infinite gain as against a loss of zero, or the unbelief column, with its possibility of infinite loss as against a gain of zero? Seems like a no-brainer

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Pascal's Wager is brilliant but problematic. To begin with, it altogether lacks a moral dimension, and in this it reflects a more general flaw in a lot of belief-related behavior.

Religious belief of the hellfire variety is a tremendously selfish business, in which I'm encouraged to save my skin from the flames without too much thought for fallout from the process; if we were to recompute the rows and columns of the wager, looking not at the outcome for the believer but at the effect on others of the decision to believe or not believe, the results would be quite different, mainly in the box where we assess the positive and negative consequences of believing in God if he doesn't exist. Then there's a question about the character of the God who is to be believed in; following that line would give me the opportunity to defend my own candidate for a principle of negative theology, which is that if God existed he would have a low opinion of people who could be scared into believing in him, or who did so on insufficient evidence or for merely self-interested ends.

Pascal's wager is his in the sense that he invented it, not that he made the bet himself - his own impulse to believe had very different origins, in his upbringing but also in the extraordinary personal experience recorded in the "Memorial" that he carried in his clothing all his life. About religious experiences of that sort I have nothing to say here, except to repeat a point made by Sartre in his story of the woman on the telephone.<sup>16</sup> The woman gets phone calls telling her what to do; when her doctor asks her who's calling she says "He says it's God." And, says Sartre in effect, only she can decide whether to accept the voice as God's; it's an existential decision, to be made in isolation and perhaps in terror. I can't tell anyone how to read what he or she takes to be a religious experience, not, at least, until that experience persuades the individual to come crusading after me. The sporting gentlemen for whom the wager was devised could not be expected to care much about religious experience or even about belief as such; their motivation was presumably a desire to secure happiness and escape damnation.

Is it even possible to adopt a belief on decision-theoretical grounds like this? To me the idea of deciding to believe something, no matter what it might be, is well-nigh unintelligible: I can't choose among beliefs. I have chosen, in a way, to have as few of them as possible, but what that really means is that I chose to submit the ones I had to radical criticism, and nearly all of them proved to be either false or dispensable. This seems to me a matter of integrity, and morality too to the extent that others may be affected by what I do as a consequence of holding beliefs. The mid-nineteenth century thinker William Kingdon Clifford, in his book *The Ethics of Belief*, laid it down as a maxim that the most portentous thing anyone could do, which should be done only after the most exhaustive inquiry and the most careful thought, is to say "I believe that p" (that's not Clifford's language but it makes the point). Clifford was answered by William

James's *The Will to Believe*, in which James said, in his characteristically optimistic and pragmatic way, that in the case of options (that is, choices among hypotheses) that are "living, forced, and momentous," that is, in his words, genuine, it is all right to go ahead and decide to believe - indeed it is necessary to do so. The question is whether there really are any such options that require this decision, whether the ones James had in mind were really forced, or really momentous. Of course a lot of things seem momentous from our little perspective, but very often when stared in the face they seem less so.

If deciding to believe is a dubious procedure, still the idea of desiring to believe, and especially desiring to keep on believing what one already believes, is understandable enough. Satisfying this desire seems to require two sorts of move: first, decline to submit your present beliefs to radical criticism; second, find some argument that will justify the holding of beliefs in general. This is where my admission of motivation comes back into play. For in some recent work on the topic of belief I think I detect a motivation exactly contrary to my own. There probably aren't too many unfrocked Exclusive Brethren in the philosophical community (I use the term "unfrocked" advisedly - there was no priest among the Brethren, but we were all priests), but I can think of Oxford Catholics and Calvin College Protestants, not to mention some philosophers with unreconstructed rabbinical tendencies, who have an obvious and powerful motivation to provide elbow-room for religious belief. This isn't new; it has often been remarked that Kant's motivation in writing a critique of reason was to show its limits, beyond which his cherished beliefs in God, freedom and immortality could be held unperturbed. But some of the apparatus of argument that recent work has produced does have some claim to innovative status, particularly the concept of "warrant" as developed mainly by Alvin Plantinga,

the concept of "epistemic parity" as developed by Philip Quinn among others, and the concept of "belief policy" in a recent book by Paul Helm.

Plantinga's warrant seems the very embodiment of the bootstrap argument I sketched above. "Warrant," he says, "is a matter of a belief's being produced by faculties that are (a) working properly in an appropriate environment, and (b) aimed at truth; and *if a belief has warrant for you, then the greater your inclination to believe it the more warrant it has*" (emphasis added).<sup>17</sup> This definition raises a host of problems: working properly? an appropriate environment? aimed at truth? not to mention the whole part I have italicized. Plantinga acknowledges some of these, but by way of deflecting them he says that they bedevil the concept of knowledge generally, so shouldn't be held specifically against (religious) belief. This opens the way to the "epistemic parity" ploy, which says in effect that if scientists go about believing in causality without any better warrant than they do, then they have their own faith and can't complain if religious people cling to theirs: we should all be judged by the same epistemic standards. Roughly:

(11) If A can believe p on evidence s, then B can believe q on evidence s', where s and s' are epistemically on a par.

This argument goes back to St. Augustine, and its persuasive force has never been better described. Here he is in the *Confessions*; he is recounting his gradual turning towards faith under his mother's influence:

From that time forward I preferred Catholic teaching. I thought that on its part it was more moderate and not at all deceptive to command men to believe what was not demonstrated, either because it was a matter that could be demonstrated, but

perhaps not to everyone, or because it was indemonstrable, than for others to make a mockery of credulity by rash promises of sure knowledge, and then commanding that so many fabulous and absurd things be accepted on trust because they could not be demonstrated. Then, little by little, O Lord, with a most mild and merciful hand you touched and calmed my heart. I considered how countless were the things that I believed, although I had not seen them nor was I present when they took place. Such were so many events in human history, so many things about places and cities I had not seen, so many things about my friends, so many things about physicians, so many things about countless other men. Unless we believed these things, nothing at all could be done in this life. Lastly, I thought of how I held with fixed and unassailable faith that I was born of certain parents, and this I could never know unless I believed it by hearing about them. By all this you persuaded me that not those who believe in your books, which you have established with such mighty authority among almost all nations, but those who do not believe in them are the ones to be blamed, and not to be given a hearing, if they should perhaps say to me: "How do you know that these are the books of the one true and most truthful God, dispensed by his Spirit to the human race?" This truth most above all was to be believed, for no hostile and slanderous questions, so many of which I had read in philosophers who contradict one another, could extort from me the answer that I would at any time believe that you do not exist, whatever might be your nature (for this I did not know), or that the governance of human affairs did not belong to you.<sup>18</sup>

The aside about philosophers contradicting one another has been a standard criticism of philosophy since antiquity - but the fact that A and B disagree doesn't mean that C is right; either A or B might be right, or all three of them might be wrong. And there's the mark of the true believer at the end: no one can "extort from me" an admission that I might be wrong. That's the difference with the scientific case. If I'm shown to be wrong it doesn't faze me a bit, I'll just reopen the inquiry, but believers can't take that tack.

The point of the epistemic parity argument seems mainly defensive: you have your beliefs, let us have ours. It is governed by what has been called "epistemic duty," a concept that again seems to be designed to comfort: if it isn't my duty not to believe in something or other, then it's all right if I do. But intellectual honesty surely requires something better than that to ground a belief. I don't wish to impugn the honesty of my colleagues, still less of all believers everywhere, nor do I want to enroll too many philosophers in the ranks of the fanatics, but fanaticism lies at the bottom of a slippery slope and I detect in this work a tendency to legitimize the first steps on to that slope. Certainly it offers aid and comfort to fanatics who wish to claim some color of rationality for their beliefs.

Paul Helm's book does this by defining a "belief-policy" as "a strategy or project or programme for accepting, rejecting or suspending judgement as to the truth of propositions in accordance with a set of evidential norms,"<sup>19</sup> and then allowing wide latitude in the choice of these norms. He devotes the end of his book to fideism, defining a fideist as "someone who holds that one may justifiably form a belief supported by insufficient evidence for the truth of what is believed or even unsupported by evidence, or even in the teeth of evidence against." Among the reasons why fideists may resort to this view one "has to do with human nature. In

the face of scepticism or radical uncertainty some philosophers have preferred a policy of risk rather than damage limitation."<sup>20</sup> This reminds us of Tertullian and also of Pascal's sporting friends, but it raises again the moral issue: risk may be all very well if it exposes only my own neck, but I'm not entitled to put others' welfare in danger to satisfy my private sense of spiritual adventure or comfort. There are situations, such as piloting commercial aircraft or bringing up children, in which choosing risk is not an option.

Helm's formulation raises an issue that opens up a large and related territory. In defining a belief-policy as a program for accepting, rejecting, or suspending judgment he goes against a recent analytic trend that separates questions of belief sharply from questions of acceptance. "Confusing acceptance with belief has wreaked [sic] havoc in the philosophy of belief, in the philosophy of mind, and in metaphysics generally," says John Perry.<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Cohen puts it like this:

Belief that p is a disposition ... normally to feel it true that p and false that not-p, whether or not one is willing to act, speak, or reason accordingly .... To accept that p is to have or adopt a policy of deeming, positing or postulating that p - i.e. of including that proposition or rule among one's premises for deciding what to do or think in a particular context, whether or not one feels it to be true that p. .... Belief is a disposition to feel, acceptance a policy for reasoning. 'Belief' carries no conceptual implications about reasoning, 'acceptance' carries none about feelings.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly belief and acceptance often overlap, perhaps even most of the time. But the conceptual distinction between them suggests another way of approaching the whole question of deciding in

connection with beliefs. For if acceptance is what drives reason and if reason is what drives action then Pascal's friends or any of us might decide strategically to accept some doctrine or formula without being open to the accusation of having hypocritically adopted the corresponding belief. I suspect that in the history of religion this strategy has been widely used.

Let me try to make this claim plausible by showing how acceptance and belief might map on to some earlier distinctions, first linguistic and then logical. Greek *pistis* translates into Latin as *fides*, "faith," the root of Helm's "fideism"; *fido* means "to trust, to believe, to have confidence in." But there is another verb, *credo*, also meaning "to believe," which gives the name "creed" to the official recitation of the beliefs of the Church. *Credo* doesn't mean trust in quite the same way as *fido*; it's also the root of our "credit," and the legal and commercial aspects of this use are not accidental. I'll give you credit if I believe you are able to repay me; this doesn't require any particular quality or virtue on your part, it's a business decision based on my knowledge of your circumstances, either on the basis of my own observation or on the basis of information obtained from someone else, a credit report perhaps. This is the point at which I wish to call in my proposition (2a) from the set of propositions I began with:

S believes [A when he or she says] 'p.'

Belief of what we might call the credal variety perhaps most frequently takes this form; A is the priest, the rabbi, the mullah, the Church, the author of whatever holy writ runs in the believer's world, and what A says, the faithful S believes. Credal belief corresponds to acceptance of the narratives and guarantees offered by the texts and institutions of the religion in question; as such it differs from fideist belief, which will correspond to feelings of trust in the founder or in the founder's representative or in the institution as personalized (for example the Vicar of Christ, the

Mother Church).

A striking example of acceptance in contrast to belief occurs in the work of the only other Plymouth Brother, to my knowledge, to have become well-known as such: Philip Henry Gosse, the father of Edmund Gosse and the central figure in the latter's *Father and Son*. Philip Henry Gosse's conversion was prompted by his sister Elizabeth's illness, which apparently had a powerful effect on him. "My prominent thought in this crisis," he wrote, "was legal. I wanted the Almighty to be my friend; to go to Him in my need. .... I closed with Him, not hypocritically, but sincerely; intending henceforth to live a new, a holy life; to please and serve God."<sup>23</sup> The belief was presumably in place already, as would have been natural for someone in Gosse's time and circumstances; a matter of feeling, though not perhaps of terribly intense feeling. But this compact with God was a matter of reasoning, and it changed Gosse's behavior irreversibly, for good or ill.<sup>24</sup>

The logical distinction that is relevant here is that between modalities *de dicto* ("of a saying") and *de re* ("of a thing"). Belief is one of the modalities that admit of this distinction. Roughly speaking *de dicto* modalities apply to propositions as a whole, *de re* modalities to individuals referred to by the propositions.<sup>25</sup> If the object of my belief is the situation described in Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky,"

(12) All mimsy were the borogoves, and the mome raths outgrabe,  
then belief *de dicto* is the belief that (12) is true, but belief *de re* is the belief that there were some borogoves that were all mimsy and some raths that were mome and outgrabe. If in the Jabberwock religion (12) is an article of faith, and if I believe it according to the pattern of (2a) because the Jabberwock scriptures say so, I may recite it in all confidence during the creed

without actually asserting anything about borogoves or raths, without perhaps being in a position to assert any such thing because to tell the truth I have no idea of the true nature of either. If challenged about my belief I may perhaps reply that I believe it because it is absurd, consoling myself with the thought that if it had not been true the scriptures would not have asserted it.

It is possible, then, that a lot of what passes for religious belief may be credal *de dicto* acceptance rather than fideist *de re* belief proper. But this makes fanatical belief more sinister than ever, because if we take Cohen's point that it is acceptance that drives action then a lot of strictly mindless action may be engaged in on the basis of dogmatic credal beliefs whose holders have no idea what they really mean. The fact that acceptance and action are mediated by reason doesn't help; we may assume that the fanatics are good Humeans, whose reason is only the servant of their passions, and if they have accepted the dogma that the infidel should be killed then that is the goal reason will serve.

This seems to me a quite accurate analysis of the behavior of some of the fanatics I mentioned at the beginning. For example, people who haven't really thought through what a fetus is, when human life begins, or what are the consequences for a child of its being born stunted or infected or unwanted, are prepared to become militant on the basis of the *de dicto* acceptance of what are essentially slogans. I don't say that this is true of every person who opposes choice in the matter of abortion, which is a complex and admittedly ugly issue, but the rhetoric of much of the pro-life movement would support the interpretation. (For that matter, the rhetoric of much of the pro-choice movement would too; there can be fanatics on both sides of an issue.) I mention the abortion debate only because it is close to home and therefore vivid, leaving it to the reader to consider how much of the violence in the world can be traced to

learned credal beliefs about race, class, property, custom, gender, national identity, tribal history and the like that function as so many programs running whole armies of virtual robots with little or no understanding of the issues their actions are to decide.

Why are so many people prepared to be fanatical about so many things? Is it the content of the belief that makes a fanatic, or the constitution of the believer? [workpoint]

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Let me conclude by looking at two of the most intellectually honest philosophers in the history of the trade, to see what they did with their very genuine desires to believe. I refer to Kant and Kierkegaard.

Kant makes very plain a flaw in the epistemic parity argument, though not under that name - or rather it's not a flaw in the argument but an implicit critique of the notion of parity itself. For there is a difference between the scientific case and the religious one. Kant sees that there are some things we can't help believing, because believing them is a condition of the intelligibility of our world. He calls them constitutive concepts; the paradigm cases are the distribution of phenomenal events in Euclidean space, the succession of events in time, and the systematic causal interrelation of events - the triad of space, time, and causality. There are other things we don't have to believe, although believing them helps us to order our own lives intelligibly. He calls these regulative concepts; the paradigm cases are God, freedom, and immortality. The admirable thing about Kant is that he never forgets this difference; he keeps coming up to the point where one would expect him to say, as a matter of affirmation, yes, God exists, yes, there is purpose in Nature (as opposed merely to order), and he will never take that last step. There are three things, if I may be allowed to paraphrase, that fill me with wonder and

delight: the starry heavens above, the moral law within, and the supreme intellectual rectitude of Immanuel Kant.

Kierkegaard thought this coming to the brink but not taking the plunge was terribly unsatisfactory; he called it an "approximation-process," and contrasted it with the "appropriation-process" by which faith arrives at the truth. For Kierkegaard "truth is subjectivity"; it is "an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness."<sup>26</sup> But here his scruples too show, much to his credit: objectively the uncertainty remains, we can't just flatly assert the truths of faith, we're always in anguish about them. Not so fanatical believers - nothing could be more orotund and assured than their pronouncements of the truth. Kierkegaard wanted to be the Knight of Faith, but admitted that he couldn't manage it; he had to settle for being the Knight of Infinite Resignation. The absurd and paradoxical truths of Christianity remained absurd and paradoxical and could not simply be tamed by affirmation. These things were as immediate and portentous to Kierkegaard as to any believer in history; he was saddled with a terrible heritage - his father thought himself to have committed the sin against the Holy Ghost - and carried its burden through a brilliant and tormented life. But he seems never to have betrayed the intellectual reserve that held him back from fanatical belief.

At issue throughout is, in the last analysis, the question of belief in God. All other religious beliefs stand and fall with this one - at least fall, since some of them need a good deal more to stand. It is not hard to see the appeal of this belief. I have sometimes thought that theology could be summed up in the three words "sorry," "thank you," and "please," and in the case of "sorry" and "thank you" I occasionally feel like a bit of a theologian myself: I'd like there

to be someone to whom to apologize for the shortcomings I feel (it's notable that the Greek word for "sin" in the New Testament is hamartia, missing the target), and I'd like there to be someone to whom to express the gratitude that sometimes overwhelms me for the good things in my life. If there were a God it would be nice to acknowledge his goodness in these ways. When it comes to "please" I'm less inclined to be sympathetic - working has always seemed to me a sounder strategy than praying when it comes to things we want, and the invention of a God to whom to send requests surely belittles the concept, though again one can understand well enough the cultural roots of propitiation and the psychological comfort that comes from crying for help in times of distress.

As I tell my students sometimes, I'm not an atheist in the strict sense, because that would involve an assertion of cosmic non-existence, and I'm only a small animal on a remote planet with what's left of my hundred billion neurons - who am I to make such a sweeping claim? But at the same time the neurons seem to do a pretty good job of testing the claims that other people make, and none of them, starting with the ones I was programmed with in youth, seem to me to stand up. They are all easily explained in psychological terms on the basis of the experiences of human beings - experiences of the grandeur of nature and of the fear of death and of the depth of feeling - as they have groped towards understanding in the so far trivially short run of human culture. The "history of God" of which Karen Armstrong writes is a very recent history. I think it would be dishonest of me to yield to the temptations of belief, and it seems to me that it would be a good thing if more people would resist them. It would be helpful, in fact, to repeat a point suggested earlier, if we could stop talking altogether about belief in metaphysical and theological principles, and relegate belief language to its ordinary-language sense as indicating

the kind of uncertainty that we might clear up with a bit of work..

I'm beginning to sound like Auguste Comte (none of this is new!). Time to stop. I will end with an anecdote. Years ago, back in the sixties, in the heady days when love and authenticity and freedom had just been discovered for the first time in the history of the world, I was a guest at a dinner in Greenwich Village given by an acquaintance of mine, a film-maker, who had found himself a new life as an occasional guru at Esalen on the Big Sur. I remember that he described his life there as one of constant erotic arousal, and his chief activity as massaging the crevices of other people's bodies with Wesson oil. He was lamenting, as people often did then, the lack of spontaneity and trust that characterized modern society, and he suggested a test of our freedom from the old shackles. We would stand, one by one, on the rug and he would stand a few feet behind us; we would fall backwards, and he would catch us. He was a sturdy chap, strengthened no doubt by all that deep massaging, so we knew he was physically up to doing this.

My then wife fell back happily into our host's arms. But I just couldn't - try as I might, I would always put out my foot and catch myself at the last minute. I was reproached for lack of confidence, for being uptight. But my response was simple: these self-protective mechanisms have been bred into me, I said, by hundreds of thousands of years of evolution; I'm glad they work as well as they do; I have no interest in learning to override them.

I tell this story now because I think it has a lesson for belief. Believing is like falling backwards; in the brief history of civilization millions of people have done it, and many of them have cracked their heads open. The fanatical believers have cracked one another's heads open. Falling backwards is not always unreasonable, if there's a powerful reason for trust; for example,

I'd do it in a minute for my present wife, if it weren't for the likelihood that it would knock her off balance. But the ongoing history of conflicts of belief suggests that trust has, on the whole, been misplaced, and that the tendency to entertain and act upon fanatical beliefs has been a terrible scourge for the human race. And I think that philosophical restraint, not to say skepticism, of the kind I've found myself practicing for a long time now, is a benign mutation, and the only one that has a chance of delivering us from this scourge. It's almost too late.

## Notes

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- 1.. One recent exception is Ben-Ami Scharfstein; see *The Philosophers: Their Lives and the Nature of their Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).
  - 2.. I find the following in Karen Armstrong's introduction to *A History of God* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994 [Alfred A. Knopf, 1993]), p. xviii: "Eventually, with regret, I left the religious life, and, once freed of the burden of failure and inadequacy, I felt my belief in God slip quietly away." This is the psychological part of the story; there is an intellectual part as well, which depends more on the acquisition of knowledge - about the physical world, about other cultures, above all about oneself - in the context of which the belief no longer seems plausible. For me the latter was dominant. The risk in cases (like Karen Armstrong's) where the liberation is largely psychological is that an untreated nidus of credulity may remain.
  - 3.. Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians: Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Dr. Arnold, General Gordon* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1963), p. 40.
  - 4.. Matthew 10:37.
  - 5.. 2 Corinthians 6:17.
  - 6.. Letters of J. N. Darby, vol. 1, p.1.
  - 7.. For a fuller working-out of this notion see Peter Caws, "Is There (Scientific) Knowledge? Who Knows?" in *Yorick's World: Science and the Knowing Subject*

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(Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 225-240.

8.. David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, [appendix]

9.. Sir Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965 [1934]), p. 61. Popper gives credit for this approach to H. Gomperz (*Das Problem der Willensfreiheit*, 1907).

10.. René Descartes, "Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking for Truth in the Sciences," in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes* rendered into English by Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931), p. 96.

11.. Mark 9:24.

12.. Tertullian, *De Carne Christi*, quoted in R. H. Ayers, *Language, Logic, and Reason in the Church Fathers* (Hildesheim & New York: George Olms Verlag, 1979), p. 8.

13.. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1400a5.

14.. James Moffat, *Journal of Theological Studies*, XVIII, January 1916, p. 00.

15.. Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*: ["Wool and Water" - ref]

"I can't believe that!" said Alice.

"Can't you?" the Queen said in a pitying tone. "Try again; draw a long breath, and shut your eyes."

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said; "one can't believe

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impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast...."

- 16.. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism"
- 17.. Alvin Plantinga, "The Prospects for Natural Theology," in James E. Tomberlin, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives*, 5: Philosophy of Religion, 1991 (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1991), p.300.
- 18.. St. Augustine, tr. John K. Ryan, *Confessions* (New York: Doubleday (Image), 1960, pp. 138-139 [Book 6, ch. 5, (7)].
- 19.. Paul Helm, *Belief policies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 58.
- 20.. *Op. cit.*, pp. 189, 191.
- 21.. John Perry, *The Problem of the Essential Indexical and Other Essays* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 54.
- 22.. L. Jonathan Cohen, *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 4-5.
23. Edmund Gosse, *The Life of Philip Henry Gosse, F.R.S., by His Son* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1890), p. 72.
- 24.. For an account of Gosse's accommodation of science and religion see Peter

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Caws, "Gosse's Omphalos Theory and the Eccentricity of Belief," in *Yorick's World* (see note 7 above).

25.. See W. Kneale, "Modality De Dicto and De Re," in Ernest Nagel, Patrick Suppes, and Alfred Tarski, eds., *Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science: Proceedings of the 1960 International Congress* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1962), pp. 622-633.

26.. Soren Kierkegaard, tr. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968 [1941]), p. 182.