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### God's Fundamentalist Politics: A Critical Review

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## COMMENTARY

### God's Fundamentalist Politics: A Critical Review

Michael Parenti  
*Berkeley, California*

Since time immemorial, human beings have sought relief from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and the brutish uncertainties of an unaccommodating world. Keenly aware of their vulnerability to natural catastrophe, infirmity, and inevitable mortality, and often heartlessly victimized by other humans, they have beseeched their gods to bring them respite from misery, deliver them from death and disaster, and wreak vengeance upon their enemies.

This does not mean that all religious experience is but a compensation for human travail. There are other reasons people have looked to the heavens. Our intelligence invites us to ponder the nature of cosmic existence, to be awed by the miracle of life itself and the boundless wonders of the universe. On questions of cosmology, physics begins to sound like metaphysics, as mysteries are confronted that once were the exclusive province of religion. Did the universe have a beginning? Where does it come from? What is its ultimate fate? How are we attached to it? Why does life evolve from simple to more complex forms? Is there some purpose or design?

Perhaps Hegel is right. In the beginning there was the world spirit, the *Weltgeist*, moving in unconscious creation, bringing forth cosmic energy that eventually objectified itself in the form of matter. From matter there evolved conscious matter in the form of life, and from conscious life came self-consciousness—the ability of consciousness to reflect upon its own nature in highly complex abstracted form—which, as far as we know, is a distinct property of human beings. What a remarkable thing is the universe that it would engage in this process of self-realizing (in both senses of the word) its own existence, a universe that creates a part of itself to study the rest of itself. As Hegel said, “It is in the nature of the spirit [*Geist*] to have itself as its object.”<sup>1</sup>

To most materialists questions about the existence of a spiritual realm are valueless, part of the unanswerable mysteries of existence. To believers they are self-evident: their deity is at work. Human beings have fashioned numerous gods and goddesses over the centuries, many of whom have slipped into oblivion along with the societies that produced them. There are two basic traditions in Western theism. There is the god of rational totality, immutable and cosmic, impersonal and without deliberate demands, a pure creative force with an evolving design (Hegel's “self-manifesting” spirit). Then there is the Judeo-Christian god, “the Lord our God,” also known as Yahweh or Jehovah, who acts directly and anthropomorphically upon history with moods of love and rage.

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<sup>1</sup> See G. W. F. Hegel, “Realization of Spirit in History,” in *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 47.

In our culture it is the latter god who seems to have the widest following by far, bolstered by regiments of conservative fundamentalists who conjure up images of *him* (never *her* or *it*) as the Misogynist Patriarch, Winner of Wars, Punisher of Personal Impiety, and Protector of Material Privilege.

The best source for finding out more about this particular god is that most influential and authoritative of Christendom's books, the Holy Bible. Some might argue that the Bible is not to be taken seriously. Over a century ago, Samuel Butler scornfully referred to that era when people believed that "every syllable of the Old Testament was taken down verbatim from the mouth of God."<sup>2</sup> But today millions of faithful still hold that the Bible is a product of divine inspiration—even divine dictation. "Every word of it is from God and therefore true," I recently heard a televangelist intone. After living 30 years in the Bible Belt, Gene Lyons reports that fundamentalist Christianity is as alive as ever, with its belief in "the historical and scientific accuracy of every syllable in the Bible."<sup>3</sup>

In 2003 a Gallup poll found that 68% of Americans think the Devil exists as a real entity. And the following year a CBS News poll reported that—instead of evolution—37% favor the teaching of creationism, the belief that some few thousand years ago God created the world in six days, as described in Genesis. Meanwhile school boards in various communities are mandating that evolution be replaced with the teaching of creationism or some disguised variation of it.<sup>4</sup>

In sum, that old-time religion is still very much with us, and it is having a considerable impact on US political life. While membership in mainstream religious denominations has declined, growing numbers of faithful embrace the enthusiasms of fundamentalist churches and televangelist missions. Though of modest income many believers "vote their values" instead of their pocketbooks, supporting conservative political leaders who claim to be restoring God to public life.<sup>5</sup>

What kind of god is the one they worship? What kind of socio-political values does he represent? It is not my intent to enter into the usual culture wars regarding creationism vs. evolution, or literal vs. allegoric interpretations of the Bible. On these pages I shall—like millions of my compatriots—treat the world we live in as the Judeo-Christian god's creation, and everything in the Bible as worthy of critical consideration.

### Underachievement and Omnicide

Alexander Dumas *filis* once remarked that if God had to live in the misery that many humans endure, he would kill himself. Indeed, why would a purportedly just and loving deity create such a hurtful world? Think of all the disease, suffering, and death, and the natural disasters that wreak such misery and hardship. Consider human beings themselves. As Yahweh's "highest creation," why are many of them so capable of the lowest deeds? The religionists argue that humans themselves are culpable, for they *choose* to commit these wicked acts of their own free will. But if humans are God's creation, then does he not bear some responsibility for what he has rendered? Why would an omnipotent all-perfect divinity create such flawed

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Butler, *The Way of All Flesh* (New York: New American Library, 1960 [1884]).

<sup>3</sup> Gene Lyons "The Apocalypse Will Be Televised," *Harper's*, November 2004.

<sup>4</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 30, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> See Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004).

creatures capable of conducting themselves in unspeakable ways? Aware of his own faulty design, why would he then endow them with free will so they might freely elect to afflict others? This is not to say that all people are evil, but there are more than enough who do hurtful and unjust things: murderers, torturers, rapists, molesters, abusers, swindlers, exploiters, warmongers, oppressors, and enslavers—some of whom even think well of themselves for the doing.

So the Judeo-Christian god fashioned a bipedal creature endowed with the potential for every kind of knavery, who preys upon fellow humans and other animals with little regard for the misery inflicted. Indeed, the misery inflicted is sometimes part of the gratification. In sum, this perfect deity is himself no perfectionist. He might have done better had he taken more than six days to put the universe together. As one wit put it, God is an underachiever.

Am I being overly harsh on the Almighty? I think not. If we repair to the Bible, we discover that Yahweh himself felt that the world he had fashioned was a botched job. Appalled by the prevalence of wickedness among human beings, he repented of his work scarcely 10 generations after the Creation: "that he had made man on the earth . . . it grieved him at his heart." So Yahweh, the god of the Holy Bible, destroyed all the world's population and all the animals and other innocent living creatures in a great flood, sparing only Noah and his family who found grace in the Lord's eyes.<sup>6</sup>

The Bible does not explain what was so exceptional about Noah and his immediate kin that they alone were appointed to survive and repopulate the world. Surely there were other decent beings among the world's multitude, including blameless infants and toddlers and even some unoffending adults. Why did Yahweh indiscriminately annihilate all? And why did he kill all the innocent animals, except for the choice pairs that were ushered into Noah's ark? Having bungled the Creation, Yahweh did even worse with the Extermination. Indeed, the Deluge might better be called "the Overkill."

Another touchy issue left untouched by the faithful themselves: if Noah and his virtuous family were the only humans to survive the flood, then they were obliged to indulge in incestuous relations in order to get procreation rolling again. Here was a gene pool almost as limited as the one found in the Garden of Eden. Perhaps because of all this inbreeding, the descendants of Noah's family turned out to be no better than the descendants of Adam and Eve.

There is something even more troublesome about the Judeo-Christian god that too often goes unnoticed. Not only did he create a world filled with natural catastrophes and people capable of rapacious abominations, but *he himself is no stranger to unspeakable transgressions*. All these are recorded in painful detail in the Bible itself.

### "The Lord is a Man of War"

Of the many wars and massacres inspired by the Lord our God, I shall offer only a sampling. Looming large is the Deluge itself, an act of global omnicide, the most horrific mass murder ever chronicled in history, religion, or mythology. The Deluge seems to have had an unsettling effect on Yahweh himself, for after the waters receded and he saw what he had wrought, he entered into a covenant with

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 6:5–13.

Noah and every surviving creature in his ark, pledging never again to destroy the earth with flood—though saying not a word about what he might do with fire, quake, pestilence, or plague.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, not too many generations later, God used one of these loopholes for his next act of mass murder, raining down brimstone and fire upon Sodom and Gomorrah, killing the unoffending children and adults in those cities simply because he disapproved of the inhabitants' lifestyle.<sup>8</sup> Mass murder is one of Yahweh's favorite pastimes. He smites the men of Bethshemesh, "fifty thousand and three score and ten," to be exact, because a few had peered into a sacred vessel of the Lord.<sup>9</sup> The Bible lists other mass attacks Yahweh launched, including the city walls and palaces obliterated with missiles of fire from heaven. In one instance, an angel of the Lord smote 185,000 men, "and when they arose in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses."<sup>10</sup>

Mass murders are committed also by God's favorites on earth under his command and often with his direct assistance: "For the Lord your God is he that goeth with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you."<sup>11</sup> Yahweh orders the Israelites to invade other nations and enslave their inhabitants. The cities that resist shall be set upon without mercy, "And when the Lord thy God hath delivered it into thine hands, thou shalt smite every male thereof" while the women, children, and cattle, and all the city's spoils "thou shalt take unto thyself."<sup>12</sup> In the battle against the Midians, God instructs Moses to kill all the men and male children and every woman who was not a virgin. "But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves"<sup>13</sup>—an unsettling heavenly mandate if ever there was one.

Sometimes not even the virginal "women children" are spared. So the Lord instructs the invaders to "save alive nothing that breatheth: But thou shalt utterly destroy them, namely the Hittites, and the Amorites, the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee."<sup>14</sup> Add to this hit list the killing of Og, the king of Bashan "and all his people."<sup>15</sup> Yahweh also helps Moses kill Sihon, King of Heshbon, and lay waste to all his cities, killing every man, woman, and child: "we left none to remain."<sup>16</sup>

God commands Samuel to "utterly destroy" the Amalekites, "spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling." The Israelites also route and slaughter the Philistines, on one occasion delivering 200 of their foreskins to King Saul.<sup>17</sup> They smite the Benjamites and torched all their cities.<sup>18</sup> With Yahweh's approval, King David and his troops conquered several nations, left no survivors, and plundered all their possessions.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 9:11–15.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 19:24–25.

<sup>9</sup> I Samuel 6:19.

<sup>10</sup> II Kings 19:35; see also Amos 1:1–14 and 2:1–4 and *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> Deuteronomy 20:4.

<sup>12</sup> Deuteronomy 20:11–14.

<sup>13</sup> Numbers 31:17–18.

<sup>14</sup> Deuteronomy 20:16–17.

<sup>15</sup> Numbers 21:33 and Deuteronomy 3:3–6.

<sup>16</sup> Deuteronomy 2:32–35.

<sup>17</sup> I Samuel 15:3, 15:18, and 18:27.

<sup>18</sup> Judges 20:48.

<sup>19</sup> I Samuel 27:8–9,11; I Chronicles 20:3.

There is a popular Negro spiritual that celebrates how “Joshua fit the battle of Jericho.” Left unsung is what Joshua’s soldiers did after “them walls come tumbling down.” In fact, “they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword.” They then burned Jericho to the ground, salvaging only the silver, gold, and other riches to be “put into the treasury of the house of the Lord.”<sup>20</sup>

This reference to the Lord’s treasury reminds us that the Bible—ostensibly a work of profound spirituality—sometimes reads like the book of Mammon, brimming with approving references to material wealth: vast herds, landholdings, precious metals, pearls, shekels, treasures, temples, and servants (slaves). “The hand of the diligent maketh rich,” we are instructed.<sup>21</sup>

Yahweh has little tolerance for democratic dissent. When 250 Israelites, renown in the congregation, gather in opposition to Moses and Aaron (God’s favorites), an angry Yahweh casts down a fire that consumes them all. He dispatches other dissidents in the congregation by sending them “down alive into the pit, and the earth closed upon them.”<sup>22</sup> Following his Lord’s example, Elijah slew a whole slew of competing prophets.<sup>23</sup>

One could go on and on with examples of divinely inspired carnage. Not without reason did Moses joyfully cry, “The Lord is a man of war.”<sup>24</sup> We criticize some US presidents for trying to act like God, but equally disturbing is when God acts like a US president.

### Whimsical Acts of Sadism

The god who presides over the Judeo-Christian belief system has a disquieting penchant for sadistic severity. Thus Yahweh orders Abraham to make a human sacrifice of his only child, Isaac. The sorrowful father takes his son into the woods, binds the terrified boy, and places him on a sacrificial altar. As he readies his knife, an angel appears and calls off the whole thing. Yahweh only wanted to test Abraham’s loyalty.<sup>25</sup>

Yahweh allows Lot and his wife and two daughters to escape Sodom but he warns them not to look back upon the city as he destroys it. Lot’s wife cannot resist a peek, and for this peccadillo God ends her life by turning her into a pillar of salt.<sup>26</sup> A pillar of salt? It cannot be said that the Almighty lacks a sense of humor.

Yahweh does not broach disobedience to parental authority. There was the son who would not heed his parents, being given to gluttony and drink. God orders that he be stoned to death by all the men of the city, none of whom dare suggest that this punishment might be just a tad too harsh.<sup>27</sup>

Sometimes Yahweh’s retributions seem ill-placed to say the least. Thus King David arranges to have one of his commanders, Uriah, killed in battle (a number of other of his valiant soldiers also perish in the setup). This allows him to marry

<sup>20</sup> Joshua 6:21–24.

<sup>21</sup> Proverbs 10:4.

<sup>22</sup> Numbers 16:1–35.

<sup>23</sup> I Kings 18:40.

<sup>24</sup> Exodus 15:3.

<sup>25</sup> Genesis 22:1–12.

<sup>26</sup> Genesis 19:26.

<sup>27</sup> Deuteronomy 21:18–21.

Uriah's beautiful wife Bathsheba with whom he already has been carrying on an adulterous affair. To register his displeasure, God leaves David and Bathsheba untouched but kills their innocent newborn baby.<sup>28</sup>

Jephthah, "a mighty man of valor," promises to sacrifice as a burnt offering whoever issues forth from his house to greet his return, if only God will assure him of victory against the Ammonites. Jephthah does smite the Ammonites "with a very great slaughter." But when he returns to his home, the first person to come out to greet him is his only child, his beloved daughter. God holds him to his vow, and the brokenhearted Jephthah eventually reduces his daughter to a burnt offering in grisly homage to the Lord.<sup>29</sup>

Yahweh is even capable of getting scatological, as when he tells some priests that if they do not "give glory unto my name," he will send a curse upon them and "spread dung upon your faces."<sup>30</sup>

One of the cruelest instances of torment and murder involves God's brutalization of his devoted servant Job. Presiding over "a very great household," Job was a man "perfect and upright" who "feared God and eschewed evil," and regularly made burnt offerings.<sup>31</sup> (Yahweh derives endless gratification from having his believers kill and burn unoffending animals in honor of him.) Everything is fine with Job until the Lord Almighty feels a need to brag to Satan about how perfectly devoted is Job. But the Devil taunts him, asking how God can be sure that Job really loves him, given that he has blessed the man with every earthly good thing. Do away with all that Job has "and he will curse thee to thy face."<sup>32</sup>

Acting much like an insecure schoolboy responding to a dare, Yahweh sends marauders to slaughter all of Job's oxen, asses, and camels, and murder all the innocent servants who were tending these vast herds. He delivers fire from heaven to burn up all Job's sheep as well as the shepherds who were tending them. Warming to his task, Yahweh then musters up a great wind that destroys the house in which Job's seven sons and three daughters were dining, killing them all. Job is staggered yet stays firm in his devotion to his homicidal deity.<sup>33</sup>

God seems to realize belatedly that he has fallen for Satan's ploy: "thou movedst me against him, to destroy him without cause." Satan, who obviously is the superior strategist, now professes to be unimpressed by Job's devotion, and ups the ante, telling God to inflict pain and sickness upon Job's own person; then surely Job "will curse thee to thy face." Too insecure to back off from this vile game, Yahweh delivers Job unto the Devil to do what he wants short of killing him. Satan afflicts Job "with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown." Mourning for the loss of his children, his servants, and his possessions, and now physically tormented beyond endurance, Job longs for death.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> II Samuel 11:2-17, 27; 12:15-18.

<sup>29</sup> Judges 11:1, 31-33, 38-39.

<sup>30</sup> Malachi 2:2-3.

<sup>31</sup> Job 1:1-5.

<sup>32</sup> Job 1:10-11.

<sup>33</sup> Job 1:14-22. Some people apparently try to cover up for God. Thus the phrase "poor as Job" is explained in one reference book this way: "The allusion is to Job being deprived by Satan of everything he possessed." But it was God, not Satan, who reduced Job to penury: *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, 14th edn, by Ivor H. Evans (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 870.

<sup>34</sup> Job 2:3-7; 3:2-16.

"The patience of Job" is a familiar expression in our language, but in fact Job does not suffer patiently and quietly. He cries out with "the bitterness of my soul" for death, but more so for some understanding of the afflictions that have beset him. He angrily asks God why does he oppress in this manner "and shine upon the counsel for the wicked?"<sup>35</sup> An excellent question that goes unanswered.

God eventually tires of tormenting Job but repeatedly reminds him of how powerful is the Lord—as if the beleaguered wretch needed further persuasion. He then restores Job's seven sons and three daughters to life (but apparently does nothing about resurrecting the servants and shepherds).<sup>36</sup> He also rewards Job with money, gold, and herds that are double the number he previously possessed, a kind of victim compensation.

### An Abominable War on Abominations

The Judeo-Christian god continually inveighs against "abominations" such as fornication, adultery, homosexuality, sodomy, blasphemy, violating the Sabbath, and idolatry. We learn that if the daughter of a priest "profane herself by playing the whore . . . she shall be burnt with fire."<sup>37</sup> Likewise when a betrothed virgin is taken by another man, both shall be stoned to death, "the damsel because she cried [out] not."<sup>38</sup> No thought that the damsel might have been terrified into silence by the threats of her rapist.

Violating the Sabbath—which some of us might consider a relatively minor infraction—can bring death if God is feeling out of sorts. Thus when the Israelites find a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath, they take him into custody to decide what to do, at which point the Lord tells them to stone him to death, a command that was duly executed.<sup>39</sup>

The Judeo-Christian god is a jealous god who repeatedly delivers death upon those who "serve other gods."<sup>40</sup> He even instructs his faithful to kill their siblings and spouses if they proselytize for other deities.<sup>41</sup> Hating alien gods is a short step to hating aliens. Yahweh is xenophobic: "I am a great King, saith the Lord of hosts, and my name is dreadful among the heathen."<sup>42</sup> Foreigners, nonbelievers, and other abominators who neither observe his laws nor enter into his covenant are to be treated as easy targets for mass murder or enslavement. Slavery is a perfectly acceptable fate for "the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids."<sup>43</sup> "This shall be the punishment . . . of all nations that come not up to keep the feast of tabernacles."<sup>44</sup>

One of the very worst sins in the Almighty's eyes is homosexuality. If a man lies with another man, the Lord says, "both of them have committed an

<sup>35</sup> Job 10:1–3.

<sup>36</sup> Job 42:11–13.

<sup>37</sup> Leviticus 21:9.

<sup>38</sup> Deuteronomy 22:23–24.

<sup>39</sup> Numbers 15:32–36.

<sup>40</sup> Deuteronomy 13:13–15. On idolatry, see also Exodus 20:4–5, 23; Deuteronomy 4:16–18, 23, 28; Jeremiah 10:3–5; II Isaiah 40:18–20, 41.7, 44.9–20. These citations are not a complete listing.

<sup>41</sup> Deuteronomy 13:6–10.

<sup>42</sup> Malachi 1:14.

<sup>43</sup> Leviticus 25:44.

<sup>44</sup> Zechariah 14:18–19.

abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them."<sup>45</sup> Remember, all of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because a goodly number of the inhabitants indulged in same-sex liaisons.

### New Testament, Old Deity

At first glance, it seems that God mended his ways in the New Testament. There is not the usual smiting and laying waste of cities, but there is the multitude who are cast into the lake of fire and brimstone and other mass killings in the Book of Revelation. Led by St. Paul and others, we also have much the same furious denunciations of idolatry, fornication, homosexuality, and "fleshly lusts."<sup>46</sup> Women are forbidden to teach, adorn themselves, speak in church, or visit friends. Instead they are praised for kissing and anointing men's feet, then drying said feet with their hair.<sup>47</sup> Women are admonished: "Thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee."<sup>48</sup> "The head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man."<sup>49</sup> "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord."<sup>50</sup> "Ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands. . . . While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear."<sup>51</sup> "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection."<sup>52</sup>

The New Testament also gives us the same sacrificial shedding of blood for redemption and revenge, and a ready acceptance of slavery, wealth, and poverty.<sup>53</sup> Toilers are admonished to "be content with your wages."<sup>54</sup> Everyone is told to obey worldly authority, for all authority stems from God.<sup>55</sup> Slaves are instructed to "be obedient to them that are your masters . . . with fear and trembling, in singleness of our heart, as unto Christ."<sup>56</sup> And—something untoward that not even old Jehovah dared to do—the New Testament god impregnates a young maiden so that she might bear him a son. But he does it so deftly as to allow her to remain a virgin.<sup>57</sup>

One of the greatest crimes in the New Testament is not even defined as a crime: the crucifixion of Jesus, as decreed by the Lord himself. None of the usual burnt offerings or sacrificial lambs would do in this instance. Nothing less than the murder of God's only begotten son by humans allows these same humans to qualify for redemption and eternal life. Had Jesus been left unharmed, presumably we would all still be denied entrance into Paradise. So we owe his murderers a hearty thanks. But it is never explained why God could not have

<sup>45</sup> Leviticus 20:13.

<sup>46</sup> For an incomplete listing, see Acts 7:43; 15:20; 17:16, 29; Romans 1:23; I Corinthians 5:1 and 6:9; Acts 15:20; Revelation 2:14, 20–21 and 17:2; I Peter 2:11; Romans 1:26–27.

<sup>47</sup> I Corinthians 14:34,35; I Timothy 2:9, 11–12 and 5:13; Luke 7:45–46; John 12:3.

<sup>48</sup> Genesis 3:16.

<sup>49</sup> I Corinthians 11:3,9.

<sup>50</sup> Colossians 3:18.

<sup>51</sup> I Peter 3:1–2.

<sup>52</sup> I Timothy 2:11–12.

<sup>53</sup> Matthew 26:11, 28; Revelation 6:10–11, and the discussion in my *History as Mystery* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1999), pp. 54–76.

<sup>54</sup> Luke 3:14.

<sup>55</sup> Romans 13:1–7; I Peter 2:13–14.

<sup>56</sup> Ephesians 6:5; see also I Peter 2:18.

<sup>57</sup> Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:35.

freely granted us salvation without having first to inflict corporeal suffering and death upon Jesus.

The abominations denounced by the Judeo-Christian god continue to be a cause of concern among millions of modern-day followers. Today's fundamentalist preachers rail against same-sex marriage, and whole denominations threaten to split over the ordination of women. An Anglican archbishop in Kenya called for a break with the Episcopal Church USA for its consecration of a gay bishop. "The Devil has clearly entered our church," he cried. Anglicans in Nigeria warned that ordination of a gay bishop "is devilish and satanic. It comes directly from the pit of hell. It is an idea sponsored by Satan himself."<sup>58</sup> Similar homophobic opinions have been voiced in the United States and other countries. Of course, gay bishops are nothing new in Christian churches; they must go back at least to the time of the early Church Fathers. What is unprecedented is the emergence of an *openly* gay bishop.

Meanwhile other truly egregious things, such as wars of aggression, rape, slavery, plunder, pillage, exploitation of the many so that the few can accumulate great wealth, and various other inequities and cruelties which we might condemn as gravely hurtful to innocents, and therefore evil, are seemingly ignored or tolerated by the fundamentalists and their god. As we have seen, the Judeo-Christian god even practices some of them himself.

### In His Name

How God treats his present-day devotees is something to ponder. In many instances it is Job redux. Throughout much of the world, millions of faithful suffer the afflictions of abysmal poverty, malnourishment, social oppression, and natural catastrophe. In August 1966, at least 113 Hindu pilgrims, nude and smeared with ashes, perished in a snowstorm in the Himalayas while en route to worship a stalagmite believed to be the phallus of the god Shiva. On this occasion, the Christian god understandably might have wanted to punish those people who practice nudity in public while worshipping the private parts of alien gods. But what of the incident in November of that same year, when 25 *Christian* pilgrims, heading for a town in Brazil, to celebrate the Virgin of Nazareth, drowned when their overcrowded craft sank? Thus did an omnipotent deity let perish 25 presumably decent people who not only worshipped him but adored his mother.

In Papua, New Guinea, there was a massive tidal wave and flood that killed 3,000 people. A satirical newspaper, *The Onion*, offered an irreverent account of why God let it happen: "The Lord announced Monday that He killed the island villagers as part of His longtime 'moving in mysterious ways' policy, calling the natural disaster 'part of My unknowable, divine plan for mankind.'" He could easily have issued the very same statement in regard to the more than 250,000 souls who perished in the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004.

Belief in a benign and beneficial deity is maintained in part through a process of selective perception. In 2003, when a US space shuttle blew up in midair killing seven astronauts, thousands of pieces of wreckage rained down on the people of East Texas. Fortunately no one was hurt. Many believers praised God for watching over them. One marquee in Hemphill, Texas, read: "THANK YOU GOD.

<sup>58</sup> *New York Times*, November 4, 2003.

YOU PROTECTED US ALL HERE ON THE GROUND. YOU ARE AMAZING.”<sup>59</sup> Not a word about God’s less than amazing performance in regard to the astronauts. Selectivity was also evident when 75 people in Ivory Coast suffocated to death after being forced into a nearly airless container for days by armed rebels. Only two of the captives were pulled out alive, one of whom proclaimed that his survival was “a miracle. It’s due to God.”<sup>60</sup>

Besides the accidental afflictions that beset religious believers there is the harm they often inflict upon each other—usually in God’s name. Religion can be a source of love and peace, bringing out the best in some people. But history reveals that it also can bring out the worst, that many of the faithful do not brim with the finer impulses. They represent a meaner sort of religious culture, with its longstanding practice of violent intolerance. In this they resemble the god they have fashioned in their own image. In sum, we cannot divorce religion from the things done in its name. Just as we credit it for acts of mercy and charity, so might we criticize it for acts of exploitation and bloody murder perpetrated down through the ages.

The Judeo-Christian god of the Holy Bible—so much adored in the United States and elsewhere—is ferociously vindictive, neurotically jealous, intolerant, vainglorious, materialistic, unforgiving, punitive, sexist, racist, xenophobic, homophobic, sadistic, chronically violent, and a mass murderer. As they say, it’s all in the Bible. Beware of those who act in the name of such gods. Were we to encounter these traits in an ordinary man, we would judge him to be in need of lifelong incarceration at a maximum security facility. At the very least, we would not prattle on about how he works his wonders in mysterious ways.

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<sup>59</sup> *New York Times*, February 14, 2003.

<sup>60</sup> Associated Press, August 7, 2004.