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*Right from Wrong:*  
*Why Religion Fails and Reason Succeeds*  
(working title of the book)

## **Chapter 4**

### **The Group-Centered Bible and its God**

In the beginning the Israelites created their heavens and earth. And their surroundings were without form and void, and darkness fell upon the face of their land. And the Israelites said, “Let there be order,” and there was order. And the Israelites saw that order, that it was good, and they divided the order from the chaos.

And the Israelites said, “Let us make God in our image, after our likeness, and let him have dominion over the stars in the sky, and over human beings on earth.” So the Israelites created God in their own image. And the Israelites saw everything they had made and, behold, it was very good. And on the seventh day they rested.

The Israelites were not done creating, however. The mere existence of a God could only take them so far in binding their community together. They needed to define their God’s qualities, tell stories about his relationship with them, and turn him into a father figure who could teach their offspring right from wrong. So the Israelites took the moral beliefs they already held

and put them on God's lips. Instead of recognizing that it emerged organically within their own society, they attributed their morality to God.

Over the succeeding centuries, the Israelites wrote books in which God worked through prophets to relay their own morality back to them. The God they created told them which behaviors were required, prohibited, and optional, and he introduced a system of rewards and punishments to encourage compliance. They began treating the books containing God's rules as his direct inspiration. Through its supposed origin in a divine being, their morality thus acquired greater credibility and persuasive power. A moral code created by human beings could always be challenged, but God's rules were final. The Israelites copied, distributed, and passed down to their descendants the books containing that morality.

The Israelites eventually became known as Jews, for they lived primarily in the Roman province of Judea. Amid the political and religious turmoil of the Roman Empire, Judaism spawned a splinter sect, Christianity. Christians inherited from Jews an image of God, and they followed in Jews' footsteps by projecting their own morality onto him. Christians decided to combine the Jewish scriptures with additional books giving God some features distinctive to Christianity. We call the resulting compilation the Bible. Its God reflects the moral vision of many authors, Jewish and Christian, writing over several centuries. Despite some variation from book to book, the God of the Bible prescribes a coherent morality.

Modern Christians have continued this ancient practice of creating a God in their own image and attributing their morality to him, but they face a daunting problem: They cannot write a new Bible from scratch. Sects such as Mormonism treat certain books from the modern era as scripture, but most Christians, whether they identify as Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, or something else, think the biblical canon has been closed since the fourth century.<sup>1</sup> Whereas

ancient Jews and Christians could write books and proclaim they derived their morality from the God portrayed therein, today's Christians don't have that option. They instead have to work within the Bible handed down by their predecessors. Modern Christians wouldn't want to rewrite some parts of the Bible, especially those describing the "basic morality" (see chapter 3) shared across societies. Christians find it easy to ratify the Bible's admirable commands to honor your mother and father, take care of the poor, follow the Golden Rule, and condemn murder, theft, and kidnapping.

The problem arises in how to handle biblical passages teaching a flawed morality. As I explained in previous chapters, Christian apologists use some combination of four strategies—Ignore, Rationalize, Reinterpret, and Mystify—to address situations where the God of the Bible either acts immorally or gives immoral commands. For those passages, they can avoid the matter entirely or shift attention to someplace else in the Bible (Ignore), make excuses for what the Bible says about God and his commands (Rationalize), develop a creative interpretation differing from a plain reading of the text, or from the interpretations Christians accepted before the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment (Reinterpret), and/or say that God works in mysterious ways and we cannot fully understand his inspired Word (Mystify). These strategies allow Christians to uphold a modern morality while claiming allegiance to the Bible. Christians live in the shadow of the Enlightenment, and they have unknowingly absorbed from the secular culture values such as freedom, equality, and tolerance. On issues such as slavery, divorce, women's rights, moneylending at interest, and crime and punishment, Christians reject what the Bible says.<sup>2</sup> Christians cannot openly acknowledge that fact, though, so they deploy the Ignore, Rationalize, Reinterpret, and Mystify strategies to recreate the God of the Bible in their own image.

In the current chapter I explain why Christians do not accept the Bible as written. I will show that many aspects of modern morality, widely shared among people of diverse religious backgrounds, conflict with the moral code that ancient Jews and Christians wrote into their scriptures. Many of the Bible's problems, I will demonstrate, stem from its authors' excessive tribalism, a single flaw with many manifestations. By exploring that flaw, we can understand why the Bible botches many moral issues and investigate how modern Christians respond to the resulting dilemma.

### **Human Beings Are Tribal**

As members of my family can attest, watching sports often brings out my worst qualities. I yell at the TV as if it can hear me. I delude myself into thinking I know more about the game than the managers, coaches, and players. Conveniently ignoring favorable rulings for my teams, I denounce the umpires and referees whenever any close call goes the other way. Most interesting of all, I announce to whoever happens to be listening when "we" score a run or a touchdown. Somehow I feel part of my favorite teams—the Philadelphia Phillies in baseball and Pittsburgh Steelers in football—even though I'm just a fan. Meanwhile, I hold a hostility toward the New York Yankees and New England Patriots that would be excessive even if all their players were child molesters.

I take some comfort in knowing I'm not the only irrational sports fan who lets my group loyalty obliterate any semblance of balance, fairness, and decorum. In fact, sports are just one of many arenas that activate the tribal instincts of human beings. People tend to divide others into ingroups and outgroups, then treat the former with kindness and generosity while viewing the latter with suspicion.<sup>3</sup> Such groupishness is precisely what one would expect from a species that

evolved in hunter-gatherer bands typically including only a few dozen individuals. Throughout most of human history, people relied on their small bands for assistance with all of life's needs.<sup>4</sup> On the rare occasions when ancient humans encountered them, people from other bands—who talked funny, followed different rituals, and behaved in strange ways—posed a threat to their own group's cohesion or even existence. Over thousands of generations in such environments, the processes of natural selection left us with brains that readily classify people into the categories of us and them.<sup>5</sup>

To see that humans have a strong tendency toward groupishness, one need only examine its recurrence throughout history in all parts of the world. Anthropologists have discovered many societies who have a word for themselves that translates as “people,” implying that outgroup members are somehow less than human. Such societies often use demeaning terms to describe others in their vicinity.<sup>6</sup> The Arctic offers a classic example of this phenomenon. Westerners originally called the natives of the region “Eskimos,” a term borrowed from a neighboring group that could mean “eaters of raw flesh.” The natives refer to themselves as the Inuit, meaning “people.”<sup>7</sup>

Further evidence of our tribal tendencies comes from studying babies, who have not yet learned about the specific divisions within their communities. Through the Infant Cognition Center at Yale University, colloquially known as the “Yale Baby Lab,” psychologist Karen Wynn and her colleagues have demonstrated that babies just a few months old pick up cues about who is similar and dissimilar to them.<sup>8</sup> For example, babies will sort each other into groups based on seemingly arbitrary preferences for either graham crackers or green beans, then prefer third parties who act kindly toward their ingroup and poorly toward the outgroup.<sup>9</sup>

Adults also show strong tendencies toward being groupish. Psychologist Henri Tajfel, one of the pioneers in this area of study, conducted research in which people formed groups based on a trivial characteristic—preferences for one piece of abstract art over another—and then favored ingroup members when allocating resources.<sup>10</sup> Subsequent scholars documented the same effect even for people who know they entered a group through a coin toss.<sup>11</sup> This body of research is called the “minimal group paradigm,” and it identifies the minimum conditions (random chance, as it turns out) necessary for people to create a world of us and them.

At the same time, other research demonstrates that groupishness is a variable rather than a constant. Many factors can either dampen or intensify the extent to which a person thinks and acts in a tribal manner, leading to significant differences in group-related attitudes and behaviors across individuals, situations, and societies.<sup>12</sup> The effects of groupishness are also highly variable. Group loyalties often have the positive consequence of allowing people to cooperate, build trust, and create functioning communities.<sup>13</sup> Only under certain conditions does a generalized distrust of outgroups degenerate into a desire to enslave, kill, or colonize them. As we’ll see in the rest of the chapter, the Bible’s authors embraced the worst forms of groupishness, and this led them to create a group-centered God.

### **Groupishness in the Bible**

When I was in fourth grade, I got into a scuffle with another kid over who had dibs on the swing. Amid some pushing and shoving from both of us, he shouted at me, “Your mama wears combat boots!” I knew this was an insult, but I also found it somewhat confusing. My mom indeed would have looked silly in combat boots—I could imagine her wearing them only for a Halloween costume—but the insult still seemed rather lame, as if he couldn’t think of anything

more cutting. It wasn't until I reached adulthood that I understood what he was saying. During the first world war, I learned, prostitutes sometimes followed the troops from camp to camp. Sometime thereafter saying that someone's mother wore combat boots became a backhanded way of calling her a whore.<sup>14</sup> That kid from fourth grade, whether he knew it or not, followed the time-honored practice of insulting a person by accusing them or a family member of deviant sexual behaviors.

I thought of that experience while I was reading the Bible a few years ago. The ancient Israelites lived in a region containing many other ethnic groups, and the Bible told stories about their origins. One such story alleges that Lot, Abraham's nephew, had sex with and impregnated his own daughters after they got him drunk (Genesis 19:30-38). The two daughters subsequently gave birth to the founders of the Moabite and the Ammonite peoples. The story thus served to demean all living members of the Moabites and Ammonites as the descendants of incestuous ancestors. It's one thing for someone to denigrate an individual or their family, as I learned in fourth grade, but another matter entirely to stigmatize a person's community. What do we call it when someone insults an entire ethnic group? Racism. The fact that the Bible traffics in casual racism of that kind speaks to the groupishness of its authors.

The Bible contains a similar story about another ethnic group, the Edomites. The scriptures describe how Esau, father of the Edomites, was so dumb that he sold his birthright to his brother for a bowl of stew (Genesis 25:29-34). It's not hard to imagine ancient Israelites feeling superior to the Edomites upon hearing this joke. It fits the historical prototype of ethnic jokes from around the world that sociologist Christie Davies has explored in great depth.<sup>15</sup> To assert their power through stereotypes, individuals from dominant groups have long told jokes in which the punch line involves a person from a minority group doing something stupid.<sup>16</sup>

Enlightened people now consider ethnic jokes based on crude stereotypes to be a form of racism, and yet there they are in the Bible. Another means by which people historically have disparaged members of other ethnic groups is by calling them cockroaches, rats, pigs, or some other kind of animal. Two of the New Testament authors, Matthew and Mark, followed this practice in comparing Canaanites and Syrophoenicians to dogs (Matthew 15:26 and Mark 7:27).

Having read hundreds of books, articles, and blog posts by Christian apologists, I cannot remember them ever addressing these stories about the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Canaanites, and Syrophoenicians. In other words, apologists have generally opted for the “Ignore” strategy to handle the matter. None of the atheist and humanist literature I’ve read has raised the issue either, and so the apologists’ non-response has allowed them to bury it. Why have the Bible’s ethnic insults and jokes failed to provoke a debate? The reason, I suspect, is that the groups the Bible denigrates no longer exist as distinct peoples and therefore lack defenders in the modern world. Had the Bible instead directed its racism toward Kurds, Mongols, Hungarians, Persians, and the Han Chinese, apologists could not get away with ignoring the issue.

Extending well beyond ethnic insults and jokes, the groupishness of the Bible’s authors led them to conceive a God who permitted his followers to enslave people from other groups. Whereas they could hold fellow Israelites only as indentured servants, outsiders could become actual slaves: “As for the male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves. You may also acquire them from among the aliens residing with you, and from their families that are with you, who have been born in your land; and they may be your property. You may keep them as a possession for your children after you, for them to inherit as property. These you may treat as slaves, but as for your



fellow Israelites, no one shall rule over the other with harshness” (Leviticus 25:44-46). God thus forbade his chosen people from enslaving each other but allowed them to enslave people from the nations around them. Those slaves became property that could be used throughout the owner’s lifetime and then passed to descendants. Several New Testament authors took slavery of this kind for granted and proscribed the respective duties of slave and master (Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-24; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Timothy 6:1-2). During the times of both the Old and New Testaments, winning armies commonly enslaved their surviving opponents, who were almost always from different ethnic groups, and then sold them through the international slave market in Israel and other nations.<sup>17</sup>

Although it was not racially based, chattel slavery in the Bible was thus motivated by ethnic divisions. The fact that ancient peoples tended to identify with their own group to the exclusion of everyone else made slavery seem normal and natural. This mentality often led them to regard a different ethnic group in their vicinity as a mass, a phenomenon that social psychologists call “outgroup homogeneity.”<sup>18</sup> The outgroup members thereby lost their individuality and were presumed to think and act alike. The New Testament book of Titus followed this practice in embracing a statement calling the inhabitants of Crete “always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons” (Titus 1:12-13). Besides encouraging slavery and racist characterizations of other nationalities and ethnic groups, perceptions of outgroup homogeneity could and did lead to genocide. This happened in the Bible when God ordered the Israelites to exterminate all the Canaanite peoples—adults, children, and infants—to punish them for engaging in bestiality, incest, and other sins.

These allegations about behaviors occurring throughout Canaanite society cannot be taken at face value, for historians and anthropologists know that every society on record contains

internal divisions. People differ from each other on many dimensions, including their propensity to commit crimes and their tastes for deviant sexual behaviors. It's implausible to believe that every single person within the Canaanite nations participated in the practices the Bible alleged. The difficulties become especially pronounced with respect to infants. Are we really supposed to believe they committed abominable sins, let alone through their own volition? Infants nevertheless fell under God's command that "you must not let anything that breathes remain alive" (Deuteronomy 20:16). The Bible treats the Canaanite nations not as collections of individuals with differing interests, values, and behaviors but rather as unified entities that must be eliminated.

### **Other Outgroups in the Bible**

Taking an even more extreme view of the Amalekites, the Bible depicts them as a continuing body extending over several centuries. The Amalekites first appear in the Bible when they attack the Israelites during the escape from Egypt (Exodus 17:8-16). To exact retribution, God orders a future generation of Israelites to kill all the Amalekites living at that time (Deuteronomy 25:17-19), and his promissory note eventually comes due. Working through his prophet Samuel, God instructs the Israelites to exterminate every last Amalekite to fulfill his earlier command (1 Samuel 15:1-3). This is a type of intergenerational punishment, one of the most despicable concepts human beings have ever devised. The Bible's authors envisioned a God who thought it appropriate to kill an entire group of people as punishment for what their ancestors did four hundred years earlier. Retribution of that kind only makes sense if the Amalekites were a single homogenous group not only at a given moment but also over time.

The Israelites' time in Egypt demonstrates a similar tendency for the Bible to view outgroups as a mass. God proves in that story that he can bend anyone's will, and he causes Pharaoh to alternatively decide to keep the Israelites in bondage or release them (Exodus 9:12, 10:20, 10:27). God nevertheless hardens Pharaoh's heart one last time (Exodus 11:10) and then sends a plague killing all the firstborns in Egypt (Exodus 12:29-30). How could infants and children, most of them the offspring of peasants working the fields, possibly be blamed for Pharaoh's actions? Given that he had already demonstrated his control over Pharaoh's will, God did not need to kill the firstborns in order to free the Israelites from slavery. The story indicates that the biblical authors conceived a God who viewed the Egyptians as interchangeable cogs in a machine. It didn't matter which Egyptians God killed, for they lacked any individual identity.

Lest one think only the Old Testament strips individuals of any separate identity from their groups, consider how the New Testament refers to Jews. The book of John, for example, consistently refers to Jesus's opponents simply as "the Jews." In describing the events leading to Jesus's crucifixion, Matthew asserts that the assembled crowd, comprised entirely of Jews, demanded that Pontius Pilate release Barabbas rather than Jesus (Matthew 27:15-23; Luke 23:13-25). Matthew then blames all Jews living at the time, plus their offspring, for Jesus's crucifixion. As Matthew tells the story, the Jews agree and proclaim, "His blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25) Paul similarly refers to "the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets" (1 Thessalonians 2:14-15). These verses in Matthew and 1 Thessalonians enshrined in scripture the Christian belief that all Jews are "Christ killers," a slur that prompted myriad forms of antisemitism in Christian communities over the next two millennia.

Besides its characterizations of Jews, the New Testament encourages an "us and them" mentality in many other ways. Matthew 12:30 and Luke 11:23 quote Jesus as saying, "Whoever

is not with me is against me.” You could not construct a clearer statement of us-and-them thinking if you wrote it yourself. Other New Testament books contain similar sentiments, as when 1 John calls the people who have left the community “antichrists” (2:18, 4:1-6), “liars” (2:22), and “children of the devil” (3:10). Even the biblical verses that gesture toward uniting all of humanity presume a group-centered view of the world. Paul proclaims in Galatians 3:28, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Paul certainly deserves credit for welcoming people into his community regardless of their ethnicity, gender, or status as slave or free. Nevertheless, Paul—along with his fellow New Testament authors—uses harsh language to describe the people who do not accept his religious claims. In effect, the New Testament replaces existing forms of group identity with a new division based on a person’s allegiance to certain religious doctrines.

### **Collective Punishment in the Bible**

The Bible’s group-centered thinking is also apparent in its approach to punishment. To see this, let’s suppose a male apologist is enjoying a leisurely Saturday afternoon at home when he answers a knock on his front door. On the other side is a police officer who immediately handcuffs him and announces, “You’re under arrest.” With a puzzled look on his face, the apologist asks, “On what charge?” The cop was waiting for that question. “Your great-grandfather robbed a grocery store back in 1907, and you must pay for his crime. You’re gonna do hard time in the slammer!” The apologist is incredulous. “I never even met my great-grandfather! He died long before I was born! How can I be held responsible for what he did?

This arrest is outrageous!” The police officer calmly replies, “Look, buddy, I’m just initiating the same kind of punishment your own God levies.”

The cop knows of what he speaks. God declares himself in Exodus 20:15 to be “a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me.” With the offender representing the first generation, that verse pledges divine punishment for the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Deuteronomy 5:9 records God making the same promise. Numbers 14:18 gives additional information and explains that “The LORD is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and fourth generation.”

These verses in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Numbers are examples of a much larger phenomenon. Scholars use the term *collective punishment* to refer to any divine or human process that punishes people other than, or in addition to, the individual who committed the offense. We can further distinguish between two forms of collective punishment. Through *kin punishment*, God or the governing authorities, or extralegal entities such as vigilantes, gangs, or the mafia, punish family members along with or instead of the offender. Through *group punishment*, retribution flows beyond the offender’s family and reaches into his or her friends, community, nation, or ethnic group, or even to all of humanity. I’ll begin by examining kin punishment, which—as we’ve seen—the God of the Bible explicitly promises.

Kin punishment is not limited to the Bible, for many societies have used it. Before the Roman Empire extended into Europe, for example, Germanic tribes allowed family members of someone suffering an injury to exact revenge on the perpetrator’s family.<sup>19</sup> From the Qin Dynasty (221-207 BCE) until 1905 CE, Chinese emperors punished the entire families of people

who committed serious crimes.<sup>20</sup> The Soviet Union often sent both political prisoners and their relatives to the Gulag.<sup>21</sup> Today, people on every continent condemn kin punishment, and it persists in the legal code of only one country: North Korea. Seemingly modelling its laws directly on the Bible, North Korea in 1948 began punishing the families of political prisoners up to the third generation, and this policy remains in place.<sup>22</sup>

Something resembling kin punishment can happen even in countries whose judicial systems officially reject it. For example, the American policy of attacking suspected terrorists by sending drones, initiated during the administration of George W. Bush and expanded by his successors, has been widely criticized for inadvertently killing the targets' family, friends, and associates as collateral damage.<sup>23</sup> Since the extra killing does not occur intentionally, drone strikes are not examples of kin punishment, but they nevertheless raise troubling moral questions. While campaigning for the Presidency in 2015, Donald Trump proposed going much further and intentionally killing the family members of terrorists.<sup>24</sup> He reversed his position later in the campaign and, as of this writing, he has not implemented any such policy.<sup>25</sup> Thus, while historically many societies have echoed the Bible in embracing kin punishment, it is relatively rare today and occurs only in isolated instances.

Owing to public awareness of the relevant verses, Christian apologists cannot sweep the Bible's much broader depiction of kin punishment under the rug through the "Ignore" strategy. If apologists failed to confront the problem directly, onlookers could easily conclude that the God of the Bible behaves in ways widely considered immoral today. Through their most common response, apologists try to get God off the hook through the "Reinterpret" strategy. John Piper, a prolific writer and one of the best-known apologists of the last half-century, asserts that "The sins of the fathers are punished in the children *through becoming the sins of the*

*children. . . .* When the father’s sins are visited on the children it is because the children are really sinful” and therefore deserve their punishment.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, GotQuestions.org, an online evangelical ministry, claims that “A new generation will tend to repeat the sins of their forebears. Therefore, God ‘punishing the children’ is simply another way of saying that the children are repeating the fathers’ sins.”<sup>27</sup>

You’d be forgiven for wondering whether Piper and the writers at GotQuestions.org have acquired a long-lost Bible different from the one you’re used to seeing. These apologists have changed the biblical texts, at least in their own minds, to say that the children are committing the same sins as the fathers. The verses in question contain no such statement, but that doesn’t stop apologists from reading that meaning into them. Contrary to their assertions, the God of the Bible not only declares himself a believer in kin punishment but also practices it. When Ham sees his father naked, for example, God punishes Ham’s son, Canaan, and makes him a slave of his brothers (Genesis 9:20-27). Even if Ham committed some kind of grievous sin by glimpsing his father’s naked body, only the concept of kin punishment could justify imposing such a severe penalty on Canaan.

Other examples of kin punishment occur after God establishes his covenant with the Israelites. On one memorable occasion, God splits apart the ground so that it swallows and kills not just Korah, a leader of the rebellion against Moses, but also Korah’s entire household (Numbers 16:1-33). God thereby held Korah’s wife and children accountable for an action they did not commit. The prophet Isaiah makes a similar statement about the king of Babylon: “Prepare slaughter for his sons because of the guilt of their father” (Isaiah 14:21). Even an infant could get caught in God’s system of kin punishment, as the story of David and Bathsheba demonstrates. After David sleeps with Bathsheba and sends his soldiers to murder her husband,

God kills the newborn child conceived through the adulterous act (1 Samuel 11:1-12:19). The prophet Nathan relays God's message to David, saying "Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD, the child that is born to you shall die" (1 Samuel 12:13-14).

The biblical version of kin punishment also includes the Israelites implementing God's will themselves, as when they stone to death not only Achan, who stole some booty designated for the larger community, but also his sons and daughters (Joshua 7:1-26). According to the biblical text, that combination of punishments satisfied God and allowed him to "turn from his burning anger" (Joshua 7:26). Later in Israelite history, God continues to follow his longstanding rules by using his prophet Hosea to curse the children of Samaritans who had sinned against him. Hosea's chilling words leave precious little to the imagination: "Samaria shall bear her guilt, because she has rebelled against her God; they shall fall by the sword, their little ones shall be dashed in pieces, and their pregnant women ripped open" (Hosea 13:16).

### **From Kin Punishment to Group Punishment**

The God of the Bible doesn't stop at kin punishment, for he also engages in the related practice of group punishment. We have already seen him levying it on outgroups, as when he sends a plague to kill all Egyptian firstborns after Pharaoh refused to release the Israelites. God later demands a genocide of the Amalekites to atone for what their ancestors did four centuries earlier. Interestingly, God also applies group punishment to his chosen people when he kills 70,000 Israelites because David violated his requirements about how to conduct a census (2 Samuel 24:1-15).



The Bible's authors were not the only people who have justified group punishment by God or human beings. The Statute of Winchester, enacted in England in 1285, legalized the punishing of someone who did not commit a crime. The king and his agents gained the authority to punish an entire *tything*, an administrative unit covering many families, for the crimes of one of its members.<sup>28</sup> Group punishment has also occurred on an ad hoc basis. After the 1984 assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards, mobs led by Congress Party members attacked Sikh neighborhoods in Delhi, killing thousands of people.<sup>29</sup> In 2016 and 2017, Burmese soldiers burned Rohingya villages, committed rape and other atrocities, and drove men, women, and children across the border into Bangladesh. To justify this brutal form of group punishment, the Burmese government claimed that Rohingya villages were harboring militants who had attacked police stations and killed twelve officers.<sup>30</sup>

Group punishment has been especially common during times of sustained warfare. Near the end of the American Civil War, General William Tecumseh Sherman took the fighting to the Confederate countryside. Through their March to the Sea, Sherman and his troops burned and destroyed houses, fields, factories, mills, warehouses, bridges, and railroads from Atlanta to Savannah.<sup>31</sup> During World War II, Germany punished the communities of individuals who aided Jews or participated in resistance movements, the Soviet Union forcibly relocated to Siberia several ethnic groups containing members who allegedly undermined the war effort, and the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, wiping out both military facilities and civilian populations.<sup>32</sup> Responding to terrorist attacks originating in and from the West Bank, Israel in recent decades has imposed curfews, restricted movement, and destroyed houses and orchards, all of which affect many more people than just terrorists.<sup>33</sup>

Governments have often justified these types of policies with arguments carrying at least a surface plausibility. Given the limited tools at their disposal, governing authorities might decide they need to attack a group that includes—but extends beyond—their specific targets. Take the case of quelling an insurrection that could lead to civil war. Insurgents who melt into civilian populations become nearly impossible to isolate, and group punishment might be the only way to reach them. Similarly, political and military officials may decide that only an attack that kills civilians as collateral damage will lead their opponent to surrender. Although historians continue to debate whether the atomic bombs were militarily necessary, President Truman and his aides insisted they were trying to avoid needing to invade Japan, an action which would prolong the war and potentially lead to even more deaths.<sup>34</sup>

These justifications notwithstanding, public opinion worldwide over the last several decades has turned against the practice of either targeting civilians directly or engaging in indiscriminate attacks that inevitably kill non-combatants. General Giulio Douhet of Italy, an influential proponent in the 1920s of bombing civilians during wartime, has few followers today.<sup>35</sup> The Fourth Geneva Convention (1949) captured the emerging global consensus for protecting civilian populations. The Burmese government, for its part, faced intense criticism from the global community for its actions in 2016 and 2017. Countries from every region of the world called attention to what the members of the UK Parliament described as a “human rights and humanitarian crisis.”<sup>36</sup>

Now deemed immoral when undertaken by a government, group punishment by a God is even worse. God is supposed to be omniscient and omnipotent. Unlike human governments, he always knows with certainty who committed certain offenses and where they are located. If he wished, God could mete out punishments with pinpoint accuracy to ensure that no one else gets

caught in the dragnet—and yet the God of the Bible regularly punishes people besides the offenders. This should not surprise us, because he embodies the morality of the authors who created him in their own image. Convinced that group punishment was an acceptable practice, they envisioned a God who shares those beliefs.

Note that the biblical authors did not reject the concept of individual punishment. Societies with kin and group punishment have always instituted them to complement rather than replace punishments targeted at the specific offender. Even in North Korea, the authorities normally punish only the actual person they believe committed a crime.<sup>37</sup> This coexistence of kin and group punishment with individual punishment forecloses one of the responses apologists might offer to salvage the Bible and its God. You'll recall from previous chapters that apologists often try to use the "Ignore" strategy not only to bypass a certain problem entirely but also to shift the focus to something else. For the case at hand, apologists might identify the many instances where God practices or commands individual punishment and then proclaim they have restored his character. Such a move would be a transparent attempt to avoid discussing why the God of the Bible also engages in collective punishment.

In another possible response, apologists might "Reinterpret" one of the examples of God using collective punishment. For example, apologists could assert that the Amalekites had to be slaughtered not because their ancestors attacked Israel but because they committed continuing sins. Although the verses in question explicitly describe the punishment as intergenerational, apologists could nevertheless insert the necessary details into the story to change its meaning. Even if they got away with it for that particular example, they would still have to address all the other instances of the Bible's collective punishment, including Ham and Canaan, Korah's family,

Achan's family, the children of the Samaritans, the Egyptian firstborns, the Canaanite nations, and David's newborn child, and the punishment of the Israelites for David's census.

Backed into a corner, apologists could simply admit that the God of the Bible sometimes levies punishment on one person for the sins of somebody else. Through the "Rationalize" strategy, they could then make excuses for God's behavior. Human beings act immorally in using collective punishment, apologists could argue, but God does not. This response calls to mind the time when Richard Nixon tried to defend his actions by saying "when the President does it, that means it is not illegal."<sup>38</sup> Only in Bizarro World would someone claim that the bar for morality is lower for God—supposedly a morally perfect being—than for humans. If anything, God should be following a higher rather than a lower standard than we would expect of mere mortals.

The "Mystify" strategy won't work here either. An apologist could assert that God has reasons we will never understand for punishing someone other than the person who commits an offense. The mystify defense contradicts the Christian belief that God is omnipotent, able to snap his metaphorical fingers and cause anything he wants to happen. With powers of that kind, God would never need to use immoral means such as collective punishment to achieve the ends he sought. Instead, he could accomplish his ends directly. An apologist might be forced to cry uncle at this point, but the picture actually gets worse. Moving beyond punishing members of someone's family or group, God sometimes punishes people with no connection whatsoever to the offender, as we'll see in the next section.

## **Punishing All of Humanity**

Roald Dahl, author of children's classics such as *Matilda*, *The BFG*, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, was a Christian up to age forty-six. He lost his faith after his daughter Olivia, all of seven years old, died from the brain disorder Subacute Sclerosing Panencephalitis (SSPE).<sup>39</sup> Children with SSPE become forgetful, endure seizures, engage in hallucinations, have difficulty speaking or swallowing, and make uncontrolled jerks with their arms and legs. Before dying, they often become mute, lose control of bodily functions, and fall into a vegetative state.<sup>40</sup> SSPE is one of many diseases, accidents, and ailments that kill children after a long and painful ordeal. How could a just God design a world in which Olivia and others experience such immense suffering? Dahl concluded that that no such God actually exists, and he lived the rest of his life as an atheist.

Other people reach the same conclusion after witnessing the massive loss of life and livelihood from natural disasters. No matter where you live, you're vulnerable. Anyone residing near streams or rivers can be overtaken by floods. Coastal areas face dangers from hurricanes and tsunamis, and interior regions are affected by droughts, tornados, and wildfires. People living at the intersection of continental and oceanic plates can be wiped out through earthquakes or volcanic eruptions. All of these types of natural disasters are recurring features of our world. Among the worst tragedies of the twenty-first century, an earthquake in Kashmir snuffed out 100,000 lives, a cyclone left 150,000 dead in Sri Lanka and Burma, a tsunami in the Indian Ocean killed 230,000 and displaced millions in Indonesia and other countries, and an earthquake in Haiti killed 230,000 and injured 300,000.<sup>41</sup> Every time a natural disaster hits, some people question whether there is a God.

Christian apologists know they have to explain why a good God would create a world with diseases and natural disasters that indiscriminately kill both children and adults. This is

often called the problem of “natural evil,” which is distinct from the problem of “moral evil” that I addressed at the beginning of chapter 2. One apologetic answer holds that life could not exist at all without natural evil. Rich Deem, who runs a website attempting to reconcile science and religion, takes this approach in claiming that natural evil results from physical laws “necessary for the proper operation of the universe.”<sup>42</sup> Most of Deem’s fellow apologists reject this solution because it seems to deny God’s omnipotence. If God can create the entire universe out of nothing—the greatest possible miracle—then he could surely create an earth without diseases and natural disasters.

A different apologetic argument therefore stresses the value of suffering in allowing people to build character. As summarized by J. Warner Wallace, a homicide detective who has contributed to the field of apologetics, “It’s in the face of trials, disasters, and other forms of evil that true courage, compassion, forgiveness, self-sacrifice, and charity are developed.”<sup>43</sup> The website for Ongoing Ambassadors for Christ likewise notes that suffering can lead to “our strengthening, encouragement, or discipline.”<sup>44</sup> The problem with this approach is the mismatch between who suffers and who benefits. Even if parents can develop virtues by caring for their dying children—a questionable proposition in itself—those parental gains could not possibly benefit the children or somehow justify their deaths.

Recognizing these difficulties, many apologists pin the blame for natural evil on human beings—or rather the first human being, Adam. To set the context for their accounts, I first have to relay a personal story. My graduate program in political science required students to write two major research papers before advancing to a dissertation. One of my fellow students, whose name I have long since forgotten, lamely tried to defend her failure to complete her first paper by blurting out, “The paper didn’t get done.” I’m reminded of her oddly phrased statement, which

implied that she had no control over the matter, every time I hear apologists attribute the origins of natural evil to events in the Garden of Eden.

To see why, consider the writings of Frank Turek, a popular author, speaker, and debater. According to Turek, diseases and natural disasters “are not the result of someone’s free will today. But Christianity traces all of our trouble back to a freewill choice of Adam. As a result, we live in a fallen, broken world where bad things happen.”<sup>45</sup> Kenneth Boa, founder of Reflections Ministries, echoes Turek in blaming natural evil on “man’s rebellion against God. . . . Because Adam fell, the universe likewise was cursed.”<sup>46</sup> We hear similar sentiments from Robert Velarde of Focus on the Family, who claims that natural evil “ties into the broad Christian explanation of the human predicament. Paradise has been lost due to human moral shortcomings. As a result, we live in a fallen world, east of Eden.”<sup>47</sup>

Did you notice what these apologists are doing? All of them remove God from the equation, saying simply that “bad things happen” (Turek), “the universe was likewise cursed” (Boa), and “paradise has been lost” (Velarde). All three authors are capable of constructing vigorous prose, and they do so elsewhere in their writings. Here they deploy the passive voice or similar constructions to hide the action, which should immediately make us suspicious. Isn’t God supposed to be omnipotent and providential, creating the universe and controlling its unfolding through his interventions? When writing about natural evil, why do these apologists strip God of agency, thereby turning diseases and natural disasters into autonomous forces that Adam unleashed?

The obvious answer is that they are trying to explain natural evil while shielding their God from criticism. Like my fellow student who refused to take responsibility for her actions, the apologists write as if natural evil emerged independently from anything God did. If they

instead openly stated that God uses natural evil to punish people for Adam's sin, they would alienate actual and potential Christians. Who would want to worship a God who forces people today to pay the consequences of Adam's misdeed? Living in an age that values individual rights, we now think people can be justly punished only for their own behavior, not somebody else's. Just imagine Roald Dahl's reaction if an apologist informed him of God's decree that his daughter had to die because Adam ate the forbidden fruit. Recognizing the weakness of their position, apologists try to turn God into a bit player in the emergence of natural evil.

Unfortunately for them, the Bible portrays a God who often exacts retribution on one person for the sins of another. I have already described how God applies kin and group punishment to both outgroup members and his chosen people, and he engages in similar practices elsewhere in the Bible. Genesis 3:16 says that God causes all women to suffer pain in childbirth because of Eve's sin. Given the intensity of the labor pain that women experience, this is no small matter. One new mom recently spoke of these ordeals in saying, "I thought I was going to die. It was the worst seven hours and 55 minutes of my life."<sup>48</sup> Modern women with access to good health care can get at least some relief, but strong painkillers were unavailable for most of human existence. God also responds in Genesis 3:16 to Eve's sin by levying punishment on subsequent women such that "your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." In 1 Timothy 2:11-15, the New Testament reinforces this point about the consequences for all women of Eve's action.

The doctrine of original sin is another example of how God connects the nearly eight billion human beings living today to the events of the Garden of Eden. Rooted in Romans 5:12-14 and the writings of Church fathers Irenaeus and Augustine, original sin remains central to the theology of most Christians, though with differing interpretations of what human beings inherit



from Adam and Eve. As stated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “Adam and Eve transmitted to their descendants human nature wounded by their own first sin.”<sup>49</sup> Protestants have typically believed that people inherit both the sinful nature and the actual guilt of the first couple. The Augsburg Confession, an early statement of Lutheranism, says that “all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers’ wombs” and thus carry “inborn sickness and hereditary sin.”<sup>50</sup>

We thus see through pain in childbirth and original sin that group-based thinking is rampant in Christian texts and traditions. The notion of God punishing all of humanity through natural evil fits cleanly as yet another example that apologists must address. If they value intellectual integrity, apologists such as Turek, Boa, and Velarde have two choices. First, they could state forthrightly that God responded to Adam’s sin by creating diseases and natural disasters. Should they choose this option, they have to abandon the passive voice in their writings and instead describe a God who accepts responsibility for establishing a system of group punishment. Apologists will probably resist that choice because it makes God look immoral and thus unworthy of worship. Their second option is therefore to find some other way to explain natural evil. We have already seen why some of the standard alternatives fail, but they could always invoke the “Mystify” defense.

Some apologists, in fact, do try to turn natural evil into a mystery. According to Greg Koukl, founder of the Stand to Reason ministry, God had “morally sufficient reasons” to design a world with natural evil, but “we don’t have to know what those reasons are.”<sup>51</sup> Following the template for the “Mystify” strategy, Koukl here appeals to an enigma lying beyond human comprehension. Matthew Tingblad of the Josh McDowell Ministry takes the same approach in saying, “We rightfully say that our comprehension is nothing compared with God’s knowledge

and foresight of all the workings of the universe. At the end of the day, we really don't know" why diseases and natural disasters happen.<sup>52</sup>

Because it's a confession of ignorance, the "Mystify" strategy works best when used sparingly. Apologists would rather give concrete answers to the questions posed by current and prospective believers, and both Koukl and Tingblad normally follow that approach. They don't play their Get Out of Jail Free Card until they confront a problem such as natural evil that affords no good solutions. As always with the "Mystify" strategy, they are implicitly telling people, "Don't worry about it, God has it all figured out." Although it's unlikely to win any converts, such a response might be sufficient to preserve the faith of someone who already has a strong will to believe.

### **Groupishness Today**

Even if they succeeded in mystifying the problem of natural evil, apologists would still need to address the ways the Bible traffics in racism, endorses slavery, defends genocide, treats ethnic groups as unified entities, and establishes collective punishment. These are not separate issues but rather different facets of the same problem: the excessive groupishness of the Bible's authors. We know from the experiences of every society ever studied that tendencies toward tribalism extend well beyond the Bible. Nevertheless, it's possible for people to mitigate the most harmful features of groupishness, and that's exactly what has happened in modern times. Since the biblical authors penned their final books, and especially since the Enlightenment, human beings have made substantial progress on questions related to group identity and conflict.

Take racist jokes (or insults) as an example. Clearly, they still exist. Some readers of this book may travel in social circles that insulate them from direct exposure, but the jokes are

prevalent in many quarters of society. Data scientist Seth Stephens-Davidowitz has documented several million Google searches in the United States per year where someone looks for jokes involving a racial or ethnic group.<sup>53</sup> Not all such jokes belittle and demean the group, but most do. The difference between modern times and the Bible is that offensive jokes of this kind are no longer considered acceptable among cosmopolitan leaders in business, law, medicine, academia, the media, and—most importantly for present purposes—religion. You can read all the speeches, statements, and encyclicals of twenty-first century popes and archbishops without finding any racist insults or jokes, and yet those forms of racism appear in the holy book that Catholic leaders regard as the Word of God.

Or consider slavery. Reflecting the morality of its times, the Bible authorizes holding foreigners as slaves. Historians estimate that in the Roman Empire of the first century, which provided the backdrop to the New Testament, slaves comprised 10-40% of the population in Rome and each of the provinces.<sup>54</sup> According to the United Nations, various forms of slavery currently entrap enough people to constitute a far lower 0.5% of the global population.<sup>55</sup> The extent of slavery in today's world is reprehensible, but human beings (led, in many countries, by Christians) have nevertheless improved on the Bible by forging a consensus that slavery is not only wrong but one of the worst things a person can do to someone else. Slavery is now illegal in every country, and it persists mainly because—as with other crimes—the authorities have not succeeded in catching every perpetrator.

Genocide represents another important change in norms. The twentieth century was bracketed by the Turkish genocide of the Armenians at the beginning and the slaughter in Bosnia-Herzegovina at the end, with the Holocaust and genocides in the Ukraine, China, North Korea, Cambodia, Ethiopia, and Rwanda in between. A genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan

marred the beginning of the twenty-first century. The ancient world had its own genocides, including those in the cities of Carthage, Epirus, Babylon, Melia, Mytilene, Hirimme, and Thyrea, plus the Israelites' slaughter of the Canaanite peoples and the Amalekites.<sup>56</sup> A critical difference between ancient times and today rests in the extent to which genocide receives popular approval as a legitimate practice. If they sat down to write a new Bible, modern Christians would surely not portray a God who ordered genocide and demanded its completion.

They would also want to create a God who punishes only individuals, not their families or groups. The Bible's repeated endorsement and depiction of collective punishment is a source of embarrassment for today's apologists. There is no way to reconcile what the Bible says about the morality of kin and group punishment with what people now believe. Fortunately, human beings since the Enlightenment have greatly reduced the incidence of these formerly common practices. Statements of constitutional and statutory rights and their enforcement through courts have given people important protections against being punished for somebody else's offense. International commitments through the Geneva Convention, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights have put additional pressure on states to refrain from collective punishment.

This moral progress across a range of topics relating to groupishness is halting and uneven but nevertheless real, which raises important questions. How have human beings managed to improve on the Bible's morality? Why are modern people less likely than the biblical authors to demonstrate the worst forms of groupishness? I will return to these questions periodically in the rest of the book. For now, I focus on how reason—the method of

humanism—allows a person to recognize the dignity and worth of all people, including those who look, talk, and act differently than oneself.

Philosopher Peter Singer made an important contribution on this score by stressing how reason facilitates what he calls the “expanding circle.” Among ancient peoples, including those who wrote the Bible, the circle of who counted as a human being was drawn narrowly. Over the next two millennia, the circle expanded in fits and starts from the family, clan, and tribe to the nation, race, and eventually all of humanity.<sup>57</sup> I have documented the myriad ways in which the biblical authors demonstrated their groupishness, and other ancient peoples showed the same tendencies. For example, an inscription on a grave from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC commended an Athenian soldier who “slew seven men and broke off spear-points in their bodies” and “saved three Athenian regiments.” Without a hint of self-consciousness, the epitaph then praised the soldier for “having brought sorrow to no one among all men who dwell the earth.”<sup>58</sup> Clearly, the groups the soldier helped defeat did not count as part of “all men who dwell the earth.”

Plato was only slightly less groupish than his contemporaries, for he extended the circle from Athens to the other Greek city-states. Using Socrates as his mouthpiece in *The Republic*, Plato declared it immoral in warfare to “destroy the lands and burn the houses” of fellow Greeks, but he deemed it acceptable when fighting non-Greeks to target “the whole population of a city—men, women, and children.”<sup>59</sup> Plato was no more enlightened on the issue of slavery. While rejecting the notion that Greeks could legitimately own each other as slaves, he approved of them owning non-Greeks.<sup>60</sup> The Bible expressed that same sentiment about owning foreigners, but norms have changed immensely since then. Through reason, people increasingly came to recognize that all of humanity has the same claim to respect and basic rights as the

members of one's own group. Once your circle expands to include all human beings, practices such as slavery become unthinkable.

## **The Rise of Reason**

The widespread use of reason does not appear out of nowhere, however. Certain factors make it easier for modern than ancient peoples to exercise reason and see the humanity of those outside their immediate communities. One such factor is the amount of mutually beneficially contact between members of different groups. In the ancient world, transportation was difficult and expensive. The common people rarely if ever travelled outside the village where they were born, and stark lines divided one society and ethnic group from another.<sup>61</sup> Multi-ethnic empires existed in ancient times, but mainly for purposes of extracting tribute from various provinces that did not interact much with each other. It was unusual in ancient empires, whether the Assyrian, Incan, Babylonian, Hittite, Macedonian, Persian, or Roman, for someone to move from one ethnically defined province to another.<sup>62</sup> Today, by contrast, most societies contain a mixture of different racial, ethnic, religious, and other identities, and people regularly interact with someone from groups besides their own.

All of this matters because of a well-supported body of research in the social sciences known as the *contact hypothesis*, formalized by psychologist Gordon Allport in 1954. Building on the research of previous scholars, Allport proposed that contact between members of different groups lessens hostility, prejudice, and discrimination, but only under certain conditions. The contact has to involve personal interaction among people holding equal status, which could occur within schools, marriages, families, workplaces, and civic organizations. Contact within hierarchical settings, as when a majority group member hires someone from a minority group as

a domestic servant, would not produce the same result. Allport also thought it essential that the intergroup relations arise in situations where people work toward common goals under the protection of law or authority figures.<sup>63</sup>

Since Allport's time, research in the U.S. and around the world has confirmed that positive contact improves intergroup relations. For example, a classic study of housing projects that integrated white and black families, as opposed to keeping the races segregated in separate buildings, found that the white residents developed more favorable attitudes toward blacks in general, not just their own neighbors.<sup>64</sup> A more recent study showed that white student-athletes who play team sports, and hence often interact with black teammates, are less likely to hold prejudicial attitudes than their white counterparts who play individual sports.<sup>65</sup> Other studies demonstrate that these effects of positive contact extend beyond racial and ethnic groups and into those defined by sexual orientation and religion. Compared to those with more narrow social circles, heterosexuals who personally know someone who is gay or lesbian are far more supportive of same-sex marriage and are less likely to hold antigay attitudes.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, a person begins to view a religious minority more favorably when someone from his or her network of friends and family members belongs to that group.<sup>67</sup>

Based on the results of thousands of studies, we can confidently say that positive contact is one of the best means to alleviate intergroup prejudice.<sup>68</sup> When a person has not previously experienced any such contact with someone from a group, it's easy to hold negative stereotypes that paint all of its members with the same broad brush. Once you get to know people from the group on a peer-to-peer basis, you start to see the complexity and variation within it, which makes you more likely to treat the group as a collection of individuals rather than a single mass. You also learn from members of the group, who probably have different backgrounds and ways

of thinking than you do. An extensive body of research shows that interactions between diverse individuals can stimulate creativity and expand the pool of ideas under discussion.<sup>69</sup> Reason involves examining and assessing information, evidence, and arguments, a process that intergroup contact enhances by bringing new perspectives to the table. You can't use reason to evaluate an idea that you never encountered in the first place.

The emergence of mass literacy is another factor that allowed people in modern times to apply reason to a range of matters, including morality and intergroup relations. In the ancient world, reading and writing were confined to the narrow group who comprised the ruling elite, kept records, or had specific professional needs.<sup>70</sup> Most people worked in agriculture, toiling in the fields as either a free person or a slave, and they were overwhelmingly illiterate. Various historians estimate the adult literacy rate in the ancient Mediterranean region as no higher than 10%.<sup>71</sup> Literacy remained low during the Middle Ages but rose during the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the following centuries. Adult literacy stood at 86% worldwide as of 2015 and now approaches 100% in Western countries.<sup>72</sup>

Literacy matters because it greatly enhances the application of reason. Illiterate people can certainly think, make judgments, draw from experience, and deliberate with others. Nevertheless, their ability to gather and assess information is necessarily limited. The range of ideas that can be accessed through printed or online materials is far greater than anyone could ever absorb in a verbal form. Once you can read, you get transported to other worlds where you see through the eyes of someone else. Facts and perspectives from someone else in one's own society, or from other times and places, build a person's knowledge, stimulate their creativity, and make it easier to discover right and wrong through reason.



In her landmark book *Inventing Human Rights*, historian Lynn Hunt points to a process of just that kind. The scattered gestures toward human rights that appeared in many ancient philosophical and religious texts lacked mass support in those same societies. Why did more robust versions of human rights suddenly come to seem self-evident during the Enlightenment? Hunt identifies literacy as one of the key factors. It became popular in eighteenth-century England and France to read novels by authors such as Samuel Richardson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and the practice later spread elsewhere.<sup>73</sup> When you read novels, you learn to put yourself in someone else's shoes, which encourages you to appreciate the lives, struggles, and motivations of people you will never meet. This kind of empathy is a prerequisite to coming to believe that anonymous others should have basic rights.

Hunt acknowledges that the two main statements of universal rights in the eighteenth century—the Declaration of Independence (U.S.) and Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (France)—were often honored in the breach. Despite the universalizing rhetoric of those documents, their authors never intended to extend equal rights to slaves, women, men without property, and all racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. Still, the sentiments those documents conveyed established ideals to which future reformers could appeal. In countries with widespread literacy, activists could print and distribute literature explaining the case for abolition, civil rights, women's rights, and religious freedom. As Hunt notes, the democracies of today fall short of guaranteeing equal rights across lines of race, gender, and religion, but we have nevertheless greatly improved on what existed from ancient times through the Middle Ages and the early modern period.<sup>74</sup>

Lengthening lifespans went hand in hand with increased literacy to make it possible for people to alleviate the most harmful effects of groupishness. Demographers estimate the mean

life expectancy during the Roman Empire at only 20-30 years. The average woman gave birth six times, and roughly half of her children died before reaching adulthood, most commonly during the first year.<sup>75</sup> Individuals who survived the first year continued to face serious threats of death throughout the rest of their life. Both children and adults succumbed to violence, malaria, cholera, the plague, and other infectious diseases, while childbirth commonly killed women of reproductive age.<sup>76</sup> Conditions in other ancient societies were similar. In ancient India, China, and Egypt, disease was rampant, sanitation was poor, and lifespans were short.<sup>77</sup>

The upshot is that ancient people were surrounded by reminders of their mortality. Assuming you lived long enough to pass through your reproductive years, you would probably have witnessed siblings and other family members die, and you would bury several of your own children. Today, by contrast, we are relatively insulated from death. According to the most recent data, only 0.7% of American children and 4.6% worldwide die before reaching age five.<sup>78</sup> It's the rare parent in the twenty-first century who plans a funeral for their child, and adults expect to live many more years. Most infectious diseases have been brought under control through sanitation, vaccines, and antibiotics. Yes, we all know we will die, but for most of us, the cause will be the ravages of old age such as heart disease, cancer, strokes, and respiratory diseases.<sup>79</sup>

To understand the consequences of this declining incidence of death, we can turn to research on *terror management theory*. Building on the work of anthropologist Ernest Becker, who sought to interpret many institutions, belief systems, and cultural artifacts as attempts to deny the inevitability of death, psychologists have tested whether making people aware of their mortality changes their behaviors. The answer is yes.<sup>80</sup> Researchers have conducted hundreds of experiments where subjects answer questions or write about death, or participate in the study

while standing beside a cemetery or funeral parlor. By comparison to the control group, people in the experimental conditions change in distinct ways, including becoming more groupish. They hold more nationalistic attitudes, show greater support for charismatic leaders, and think and act more negatively toward racial and religious outsiders.<sup>81</sup>

The empirical tests of terror management theory thus offer insights into how Peter Singer's expanding circle came into being. One reason why we draw a broader circle than in ancient times is that many more people now have sufficient security to care about somebody halfway around the world. When you're worried that you and your loved ones could die from a mysterious infection or some other cause, as was common in the ancient world, you strengthen your bonds with your own family and tribe, the people you know you can trust. You can't afford to be generous toward outsiders; after all, they might be the ones bringing disease or other disruptions to your community. Notions of universal human rights ring hollow under those conditions, but the process can be reversed. As the philosophers Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell explain, the greater physical and material security in the wealthiest countries today, and increasingly in countries such as India, China, and Indonesia, makes it more likely that people will see someone outside their local community as a fellow human rather than a potential threat.<sup>82</sup>

### **The Trajectory of Groupishness**

Let me end the chapter by returning to a point I introduced at its beginning: Human beings have a strong tendency to act in a tribal manner. Our brains are wired to divide the people we meet into the categories of Us and Them. That's the bad news. The good news is that our categories are fluid and malleable. We all carry multiple identities—based on religion, gender,

occupation, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, interests, region, hobbies, political affiliation, sexual orientation, position within the family, and other variables—such that the composition of the ingroup and outgroup can shift according to what each situation or context makes salient. We can also increase the number of people who count as part of our ingroup. Under the right conditions, we can consider all human beings equally deserving of basic rights and dignity.

I have identified three factors—positive contact among people from different groups, mass literacy, and lengthening lifespans—that have facilitated our ability to use reason to break down the barriers to including all of humanity within the circle of concern. No doubt other factors could also be highlighted that have made this transformation possible. The change in worldview that accompanied the expanding circle has engulfed people of all persuasions, including Christians—thereby creating a problem. The Christian scriptures depict a group-centered God who endorses slavery and genocide, treats ethnic groups as undifferentiated masses, and practices kin and group punishment. That’s not what people today have in mind when they think of a God who is incapable of behaving immorally.

Christians have responded by recreating God in their own image. Through judicious applications of the Ignore, Rationalize, Reinterpret, and Mystify strategies, Christian apologists have tried to reformulate the God of the Bible into a morally perfect being who deserves adulation, respect, and worship. The current and previous chapters have given many examples of their handiwork. Considered one at a time, each example certainly raises eyebrows, but a charitable reader might be inclined to withhold comment if the rest of the apologetic case for Christianity was convincing. The problem arises when apologists pile one such example upon another, offering increasingly strained arguments to salvage the Bible and its God. At that point, the field of apologetics degenerates into an elaborate attempt to defend the indefensible.

Science writer and noted skeptic Michael Shermer warns us to beware of smart people, who are good at constructing justifications for beliefs they acquired through non-rational means.<sup>83</sup> Apologists could easily stand as Exhibit A for Shermer's cautionary note. Their intelligence allows them to make an indefensible position sound plausible, at least to committed believers. Backed by strong faith and years of learning, apologists convince themselves that they have solved the problems the Bible poses, and then they try to persuade others. Apologists start from their conclusion that the God of the Bible must always be morally pure, and then they use their talents to figure out how best to defend that conclusion with the four strategies available to them.

What happens if a person begins instead without preconceptions about what the Bible says? Any such study will reveal the Bible to be not the Word of God but rather the words of human beings, specifically ancient Jews and Christians. Drawing from the cultural beliefs and assumptions of their era, they created God in their own image and gave him their morality, an excessively groupish morality that no one in the modern world accepts in its totality. If apologists want to avoid acknowledging these moral flaws in the Bible and its God, they could make one last move in challenging my standing to make any judgments one way or the other. In the eyes of virtually all apologists, atheists such as myself have no grounding for our moral beliefs. If no God exists, isn't it just my opinion that the biblical statements and commands I have discussed are immoral?

I answered that objection in the last chapter, where I appealed to reason and inclusive deliberation as the means by which we can attain a morality stripped of the biases and subjectivity of any person or society. Over the last few hundred years, human beings around the world have deliberated about moral questions within their families, workplaces, neighborhoods,

community groups, and national assemblies, not to mention in books and other written materials. Much of that deliberation has focused on the consequences of groupishness, the subject of this chapter. Regardless of their nationality, race, religion, gender, and other identities, people have overwhelmingly concluded that slavery, genocide, kin punishment, and group punishment are wrong. It's not just my opinion that those practices are immoral; it's the settled consensus that human beings, in all their diversity, have reached after engaging the issues thoughtfully and systematically. Behaviors violating the consensus happen today despite rather than because of the moral beliefs ordinary people hold.

I don't expect devout Christians to accept my claim that morality can be grounded in reason and inclusive deliberation rather than the commands of a God. People do not easily abandon the kind of faith a person needs to believe that God communicated his moral rules and principles through the Bible and, for Catholics, the teaching authority of the Church and its traditions. When confronted with evidence that the Bible's morality is flawed in many respects, most Christians decide to shoot the messenger and find someone who can bring them better news. Apologists are willing and able to serve in that role.

The difficulty for apologists is that they have to defend the Bible regardless of what it says. Humanists such as myself, by contrast, can evaluate each of its claims and commands on a case-by-case basis. I have read and studied the Bible for most of my life, and I treasure its insights into how human beings can and do live. I applaud its instructions to build strong families, strive for justice, care for the poor, and love your neighbor as yourself. At the same time, I stand with most people today in rejecting its rank tribalism. Humanists can take a balanced view of the Bible, recognizing that it offers moral guidance that should not be discarded lightly. We also see how it contains other content that should be dumped straight into the trash.

If I wasn't there already, that last sentence probably crossed the line into blasphemy. Throughout most of Christian history, denigrating even part of God's revelation would have qualified as such. The Bible requires the death penalty for blasphemers (Leviticus 24:16), and Western countries through the ages have executed many offenders.<sup>84</sup> Legislators and courts gradually reduced the maximum penalty to fines or jail, and they eventually either overturned the laws altogether or left them unenforced.<sup>85</sup> In any Western country today, there is zero chance the authorities will execute me for committing blasphemy, which raises an important question: How did religious freedom become sufficiently established that even blasphemers and atheists enjoy its protections? How did Christians overcome their own history to become strong advocates for religious freedom? I tackle these and other questions in the next chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the differences between these branches of Christianity over whether the Old Testament Apocrypha should be included as scripture, none of them accept anything written after the final New Testament books.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this point, see my earlier book *Secular Faith: How Culture Has Trumped Religion in American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> David Berreby, *Us & Them: The Science of Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

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