Zoroaster: Struggles between Good and Evil

Zoroaster, a legendary prophet who probably lived toward the end of the 2nd Millennium BCE, proclaimed a new religion based on a belief in a supreme god *Ahura Mazda* (Lord of Wisdom) who fights for truth and order (*asha*) against the forces of deceit and chaos (*druj*) led by *Angra Mainyu* (Evil Spirit). Since fire is the symbol of *asha*, Zoroastrian temples contain an eternal sacred flame, which represents the presence of *Ahura Mazda*. Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest organized religions of the world and one of the smallest, with only about 120,000 adherents in the world today.

History

Sometime between 4000 and 1500 BCE a people speaking a proto-Indo-European language came to Eastern Iran and Northwest India. They may have come from the Steppes or from Anatolia or both (see Heggarty et al, 2023). As well as their language they carried with them a multitude of gods and a sense of cosmic order or justice. These migrants divided into those that travelled into India speaking Indo-Aryan languages such as Sanskrit, and those that came to Iran speaking Iranian languages such as Avestan. A concept of cosmic order common to both groups became known as *rta* in the Sanskrit *Vedas*, the earliest of Hindu Scriptures, and as *asha* in the Avestan *Gathas,* the earliest Zoroastrian scriptures (Schlerath & Skjærvø, 2018).

Zarathustra was a prophet in Iran who lifted one of the many gods above the others. His name perhaps meant “handler of camels” and his God was *Ahura Mazda*. The name was transliterated into Greek as Zoroaster, which could be read as

“pure star,” but this meaning was coincidental. No one knows anything for certain about the life of Zoroaster, but most scholars estimate that he lived sometime toward the end of the 2nd Millennium BCE (Boyce, 1989, p 190; Nigosian, 1993, p 15; Hartz, 2004, p 20; Stausberg, 2008, p 20; Malandra, 2015), although he might have lived at anytime between 1500 BCE and the founding of the Achaemenid Empire in 550 BCE by Darius the Great. Zoroastrianism became the official religion of that empire. The Behistun monument near Kermanshah shows Darius trampling his rival Gaumata and welcoming as prisoners the kings that he has conquered.

The extensive cuneiform inscription, written in Old Persian, Akkadian and Elamite, describes his conquests and affirms

> King Darius says: This is what I have done, by the grace of Ahuramazda have I always acted. Whosoever shall read this inscription hereafter, let that which I have done be believed. You must not hold it to be lies.

The following map shows the extent of the Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BCE):

The following shows an enameled brick panel from the Palace of Darius created in Susa in about 550 BCE and presently in the Louvre Museum. It shows two guardian *aladlammu*, also known as *lamassu*: composite creatures with the body of a bull or lion, a human head and wings of an eagle (Ritter, 2010). This motif originates in earlier Mesopotamian empires, particularly the Assyrian. The human head represents intelligence, the bull's body strength and the eagle's wings freedom. Above the *aladlammu* is a winged disc which represents the grace of Ahura Mazda. This motif was also present in the Behistun inscription:

The Achaemenid Empire replaced the preceding empires of the Assyrians, Babylonians and Medians. In 480 BCE Xerxes, the son of Darius invaded Greece. Though the Persians were able to sack Athens, the invasion ultimately failed in the Peloponnese.

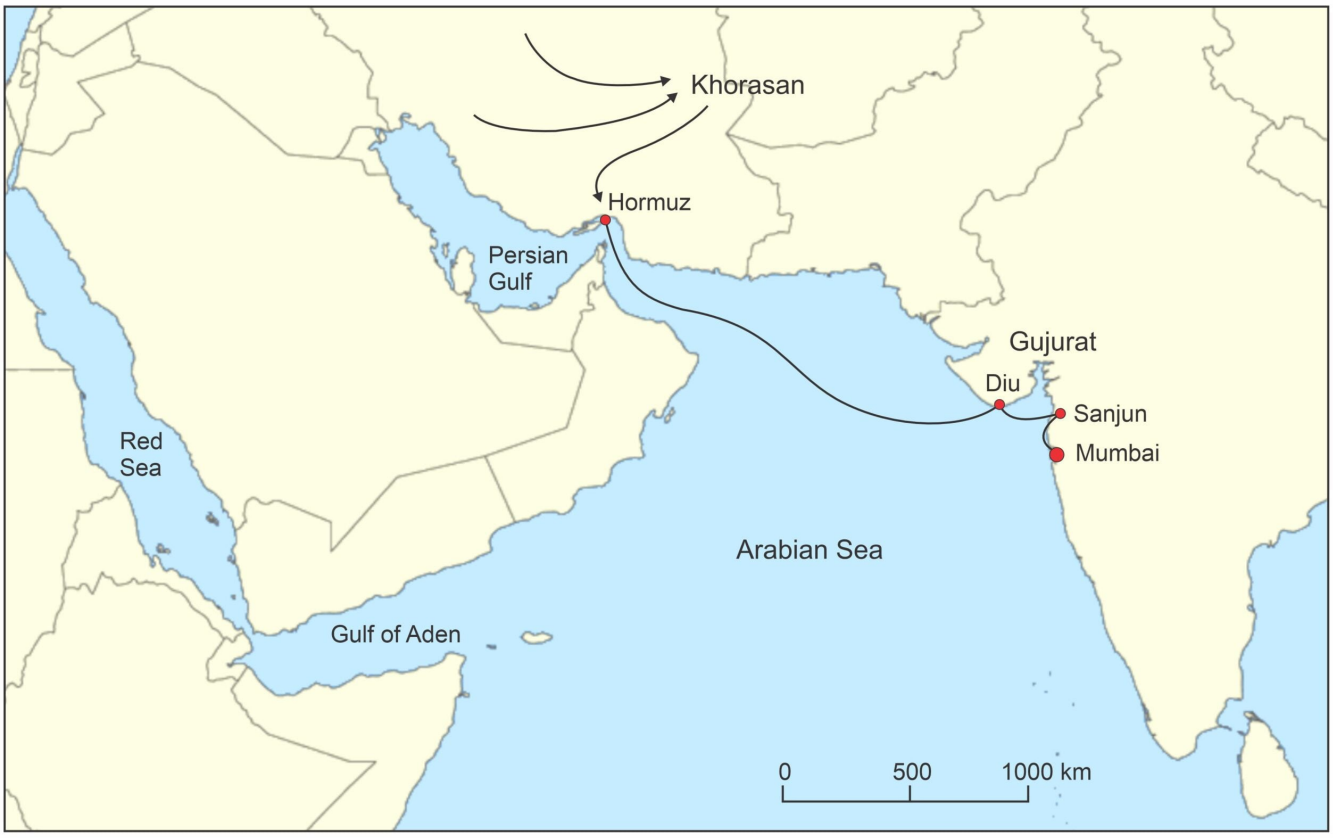
In 334 BCE Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE) invaded Persia. Over the next few years, he established his own empire stretching from Alexandria in Egypt to the borderlands of India. Upon his death, his general Seleucus I Nicator ruled over the eastern part of this region as the Seleucid Empire

(312-63 BCE). The Romans later took control of the Western part of this empire (Syria), leaving Iran to be ruled by the Parthians (247 BCE – 224 CE). The greatest of the Parthian emperors was Mithradates I, whose name meant “gift of Mithra,” and who reigned from 165–132 BCE. Then, from 224 to 651 CE, Iran became the center of the Sasanian Empire. Throughout this prolonged period of changing empires, Zoroastrianism remained as the official Persian religion (Malandra, 2015). By the time of the Sasanian empire, the Avestan language had evolved into Middle Persian (*Pahlavi*), the direct ancestor of modern Persian (*Farsi*): Ahura Mazda was now named *Ormazd*, and *Angra Mainyu* had become *Ahriman*.

The following illustration shows a relief carving at Naqsh-e Rostam from about 235 CE, showing the investiture of Ardashir I (180–242 CE), the founder of the Sasanian Empire, as the *Shahanshah* (King of Kings) by Ahura Mazda. On the right, the horse of Ahura Mazda tramples Ahriman beneath its hooves. Ahura Mazda is giving the diadem of kingship to Ardashir, whose own horse tramples the body of Artabanus V, the last king of the Parthian Empire. He holds in his left hand a *barsom* (a bundle of twigs used in Zoroastrian rituals). Ardashir wears an elaborate turban (*korymbos*). Behind Ardashir is the Zoroastrian high priest, Kartir.

In 633, one year after the founding of Islam, Muslim forces under Muhammed first invaded the western regions of the Sasanian Empire. The Empire had been weakened by prolonged conflict with the Byzantine Empire, and by fragmentation into different feuding regions. Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second Rashidun caliph continued the conquest and by his death in 644 CE most of Persia was under Muslim rule. Some of the central regions, such as the province of Khorasan, were not fully subjugated until 651 (Litvinsky et al., 1996). Although under Arab rule, Persia was able to maintain much of its culture, particularly during the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258; 1261–1517). Although Arabic became the dominant language in other areas of Muslim rule, the Persian language flourished. Ferdowski's *Shanameh*, the great epic of Persian poetry, completed in 1010 CE, retold the history of Persia from ancient times to time of its writing. Nevertheless, Islam completely replaced Zoroastrianism as the state religion (Choksy 2018).

The Muslims tolerated Christians and Jews since they were "People of the Book," but persecuted Zoroastrians as pagan infidels. Many fire-temples were transformed into mosques and many Zoroastrians converted to Isam. Some faithful Zoroastrians retreated to inland regions of Persia, such as Khorasan. In the 9th Century, Babak Khorramdin led a brief Zoroastrian rebellion against Arab rule, but this came to naught. Some Zoroastrians decided to leave their newly Islamic land and settle in India (Hinnells & Williams, 2007). Zoroastrians had traded with the Indians of the Gujarat region even before the Muslim conquest. A Zoroastrian migration to India were described in an epic poem *Qissa-i Sanjan,* written by a Zoroastrian priest in 1599 CE. The poem recounts how the Zoroastrians sailed from the Island of Hormuz and initially settled in Diu before moving on to Sanjun and thence to Mumbai. Although the poem describes one specific migration, groups of Zoroastrians likely moved to India from Persia over several centuries, and over several routes.



A famous story is told about the arrival of the Zoroastrians in Gujarat. The local king Jadi Rana explained that his kingdom was full and showed a cup of milk filled to the brim to illustrate this problem. One of the Zoroastrian priests added sugar to the milk to show how the new immigrants could enrich the land without displacing anyone. Asylum was granted, and Zoroastrians still partake of *faloodeh* – a dessert of vermicelli, milk, sugar and rosewater – at times of celebration

Over the years, the Zoroastrian immigrants became a flourishing community in northeast India, known as the *Parsis* or "those from Persia" (Hinnells & Williams, 2007). The Parsis have maintained the rituals of their Zoroastrian forebears. Though they remain small in numbers (about 50,000 in the present day), they have contributed extensively to the economy and culture of India. About 20,000 Zoroastrians remain in modern Iran. Other smaller Zoroastrian communities exist in North America and Europe, set up by Iranian emigrants or by Parsis mercantile connections. The total number of Zoroastrians in the world is about 120,000.

Basic Principles of Zoroastrianism

As in any religion, the founding texts of Zoroastrianism provide sometimes contradictory claims. This problem is exacerbated by the difficulty in interpreting the language in which these texts were written. A text entitled *The Advice Book of Zarathustra* from the Pahlavi period (probably originating in the late Sasanian dynasty but not written down until much later) begins with the following verses which summarize the main tenets of the Zoroastrian faith (Vevaina, 2015, pp 214-215; Skjaervo, 2011, pp 192-193):

> The Teachers of Old, who have the foremost knowledge of the Religion, have said that, at the age of fifteen, one should know the following: "Who am I, and to whom do I belong? Where did I come from, and to where will I go back? … And

> what are my duties in the world of the living (*getig)*, and what is my reward in the world of thought (*menog*)? … Do I belong to Ohrmazd, or do I belong to Ahreman, to the gods or to the demons, to the good or the bad? Am I a human or a demon? How many are the paths, and which is my Religion?… … Are the Origins one or two? From whom is goodness and badness?
>
> I belong to Ohrmazd, not to Ahreman, to the gods, not to the demons, to the good, not to the bad. I am a human, not a demon, the creature of Ohrmazd, not of Ahreman … My duties and obligations are to think about Ohrmazd that he is, has always been, and will always be, that he is the immortal ruler, boundless, and pure, while Ahreman is not and shall be destroyed … have to have no doubt that good deeds are good for me and bad deeds bad for me; that my friend is Ohrmazd and my enemy Ahrimen; and that the path of the Tradition is one …The one path is that of good thought, speech, and action; paradise is the light and purity and limitlessness of Ohrmazd the Creator, who has always been and shall always be. Another is the path of evil thought, speech, and action. This is the darkness, boundedness, all evil and destruction, and badness of the wicked one, the Foul Spirit, who once upon a time was not in this creation and who once in the future shall not be in the creation of Ohrmazd, but in the end will be annihilated. …I must have no doubt about this too, that the Origins are two: the Creator and the Destroyer. The Creator is Ohrmazd, from whom all goodness and all light emanates. The Destroyer is the wicked Evil Spirit, who is all badness and full of death, wicked and deceiving. … I have to have no doubt about these things, … that very person is mortal; that the soul (*gyān*) is expelled and the body destroyed; that the accounting takes place at the third dawn (*sidōsh*); that the Resurrection and the Final Body will come about.

In summary: One God – Ahura Mazda (Ohrmazd) – created and

rules the world according to the principles of *asha*. He and will ultimately triumph over the forces of *druj* (deceit, evil) led by Angra Mainyu. Human beings must follow the way of *asha* by means of good thought, good speech and good action. This will justify their resurrection after death.

(i) *Asha*

The starting point for any interpretation of Zoroastrianism is the concept of *asha* (or *asa*, depending on the transliteration). This Avestan word goes back long before Zoroaster to the time when the proto-Indo-European language was being formulated. It is homologous to *rta* Sanskrit (Schlerath & Skjærvø, 2018). The meaning of *asha* is very difficult to express in a single word. Irani (1990) proposes that it contains four main ideas:

> The first is the most general philosophical concept, **Truth**. The second is the cosmological implication of the **Order** underlying the universe. The third and fourth belong to the moral dimension – **Right** as the most general term of moral correctness, and **Justice** as the moral principle of the social system.

In these early times before the monotheistic reformations of Zoroaster, one of the many gods, Mithra (or Mitra), was responsible for the maintenance of *asha*. The name of Mitra combines *mi* (bind) with *tra* (causing to) to suggest covenants, oaths, truth-telling and contracts – the bases of social order and harmony. Mithra is portrayed as radiating light like the sun. Boyce (1975, p 27) describes Mithra's role:

> One of the striking features of his activity is that he is concerned with upholding the great Indo-Iranian principle of *rta/asa.* This term, it is now generally accepted, represents a concept which cannot be precisely rendered by any single word in another tongue. It stands, it seems, for

> “order” in the widest sense: cosmic order, by which night gives place to day and the seasons change; the order of sacrifice, by which this natural rhythm is strengthened and maintained; social order, by which men can live together in harmony and prosperity; and moral order or “truth”. In both India and Iran to possess *rta* or *asa,* to be *rtavan* or *asavan,* was to be a just and upright being; and when used of the dead these words implied that the departed was blessed in the hereafter, having attained the Paradise which he deserved.

Ahmadi (2015) proposed that *asha* in effect refers to the whole of creation, that which has been ordered, and might be expressed by the word “cosmos” which derives from the Greek *kosmein* (to arrange or to put into proper order). (“Cosmetic” has the same etymology.)

The concept that there is some underlying order in the universe, that everything is unfolding as it should, is common to many different philosophies and religions. The *asha/rta* of the Indo-European forebears is closely related to *Maat* in Ancient Egypt, to the *Dao* in China and to the *logos* in Greek philosophy. To my mind these concepts essentially indicate that the world is intelligible. There is an order behind things that we can try to understand and to follow, “a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will” (*Hamlet*, V:2)

Asha is the subject of a Zoroastrian prayer recited during all Zoroastrian observances (Rose, 2011a, p 24)

> *Ashem vohu*
> *vahishtem asti*
> *ushta asti*
> *ushta ahmai*
> *hyat ashai vahishtai ashem*
>
> Asha is the best good

> It is happiness [or 'it is desired'],
> according to our desire, there will be
> Asha which belongs to the best Asha."

Another translation (Nigosian 1993, p 103) is

> Righteousness [is] good, it is best.
> According to [our] wish it is,
> according to our wish it shall be.
> Righteousness belongs to Asa Vahista.

(ii) Monotheism

Zoroaster's great contribution to human religious thought was to proclaim one God – Ahura Mazda – as the supreme creator and lord of the universe. The Jewish patriarch Abraham who may have lived sometime toward the end of the 2nd millennium BCE is generally considered the first monotheist. However, recent evidence suggests that although Jewish monotheism had its beginnings around the 1st Millenium BCE, it was not fully formulated until the period of the Babylonian Exile in the 6th Century BCE (Gnose, 1997, Chapter 2). Yahweh was initially considered as the God of the Israelites and only later evolved to be the God of the whole universe. Zoroaster probably lived at around the same time as Abraham, though both are legendary rather than historical figures, Zoroaster may have been the first prophet to preach universal monotheism, and Zoroastrianism the first monotheistic religions to survive its founder (Ferrero, 2021). The Egyptian Akhenaten (servant of Aten, 1353-1336 BCE) favored the Sun God *Aten* above all other gods, but *Atenism* did not persist beyond his brief lifetime.

Ahura Mazda was recognized before Zoroaster, though he was not as clearly defined as some of the other gods of the Indo-European pantheon, such as Mithra (god of the sun and of covenants) and Apam Napat (god of water and fertility).

Zoroaster reportedly had a vision in which he met Ahura Mazda in person, and recognized him as the supreme creator, and source of *asha*. In the religion that he proclaimed, some of the other gods were somehow subsumed into Ahura Mazda. Hymns are offered in praise of both Ahura Mazda and Mithra. Many other gods remained separate but were still considered worthy of worship (*yazata*). These were subservient to the will of Ahura Mazda (Hintze, 2014). In all monotheistic religions, the supreme God, even though omnipotent, needs other heavenly beings to facilitate his plans. In the Abrahamic religions, these are called angels.

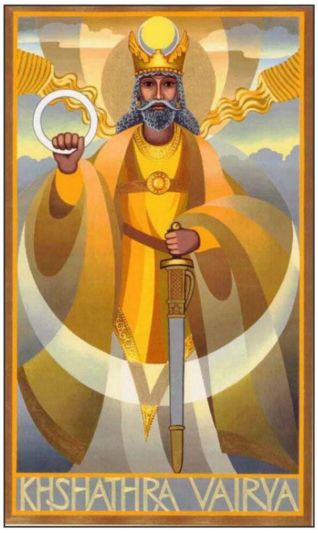
One of the earliest acts of Ahura Mazda was to create the *Amesha Spenta* (Immortal Benevolents). These are as much abstract concepts – emanations from the mind of Ahura Mazda – as actual divinities. They share some of the characteristics of the Seven Heavenly Virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude, faith, hope, and charity) in Christianity and their organization is related to the Five Great Elements (*Pancha Mahabhuta*, earth water, fire, air, ether) of Hinduism. They are generally considered six in number (Stausberg, 2008, p 29) though some authors describe seven (Rose, 2011a, p 29). The following illustration shows some modern images:

Amesha Spentas

Beneficial Immortals

Good Mind, Animals

Truth and Justice, Fire



Power, Sky/Metal

Devotion, Earth

Wholeness, Water

Immortality, Plants

Holy Spirit, Humans

(iii) Dualism

Essential to Zoroastrianism is the concept of dualism (Gnoli, 2017; Vevaina, 2015). In the Gathas (Y 30:3-4), Zoroaster reveals his vision (or dream) about the two opposing forces in the world (Ahmadi, 2013). Our incomplete understanding of the Avestan language limits our interpretation but the following is one translation:

> The two primeval Spirits, who are twins, were revealed to me in sleep. Their ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving are two: the good and the evil. And between these two ways the wise men have rightly chosen, and not the foolish ones. And when these two Spirits met, they established at the

> origin life and non-life, and that at the end the worst existence will be for the followers of Falsehood and for the follower of Truth the Best Thinking. (translation from Gnoli, 2017).

The two spirits are Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu. Ahura Mazda, assisted by the *amesha spenta* and the *yazatas*, supports *asha* (truth, justice, order, righteousness). Angra Mainyu promotes *druj* (lie, wrongdoing, chaos, evil) with the support of *daevas* (devils, demons).

Angra Mainyu is a spirit of destruction, incapable of creating anything, and inactive in the absence of creation. Its home is the kingdom of death. Boyce (1975, p 199) describes the spirit:

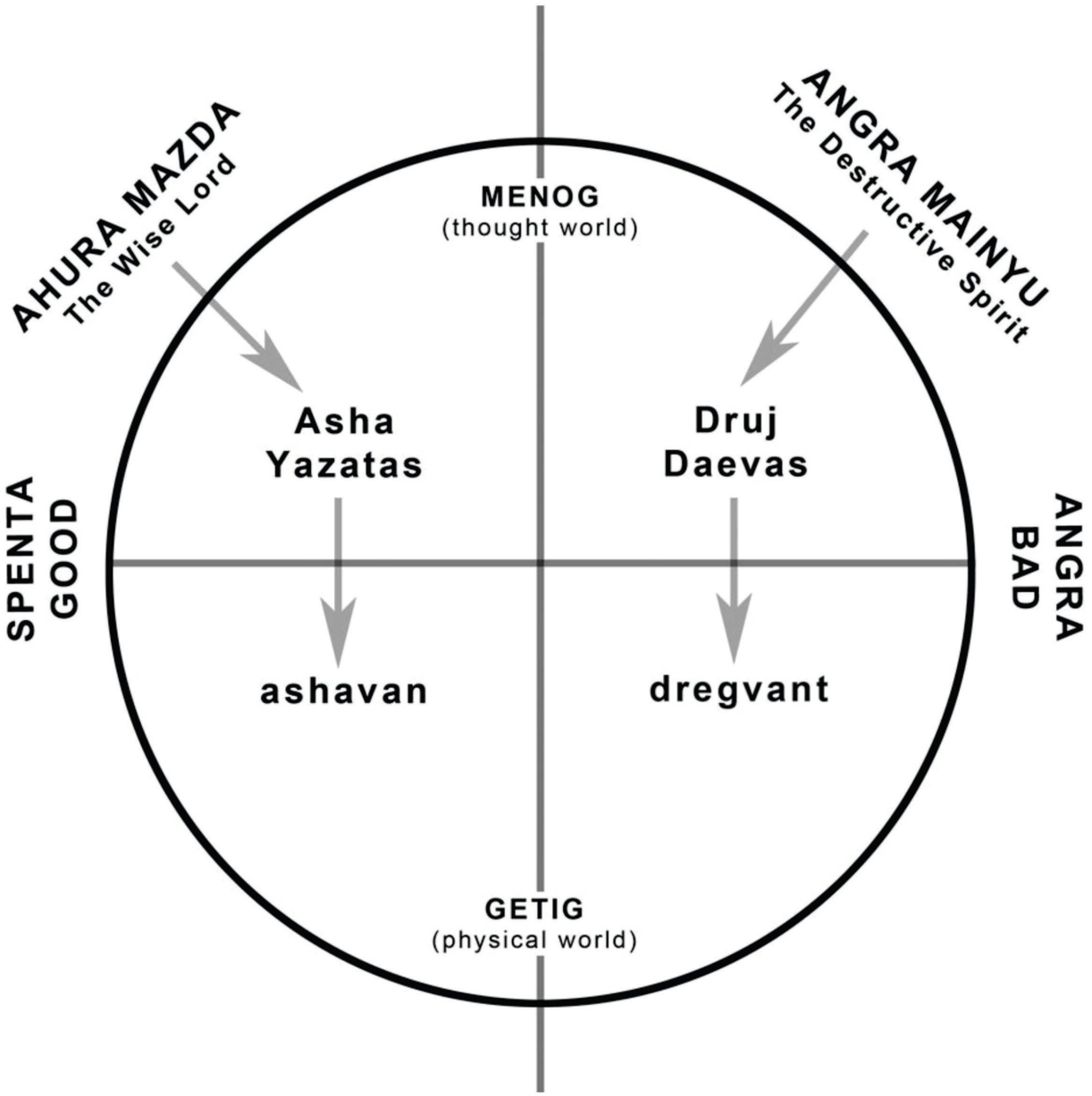
> Angra Mainyu is seen both as actively malignant, a militant foe, and also as a mere shadow, a negation of good; for traditionally existence in the kingdom of the dead was characterised by a lack of substance, by a spectral quality without positive capacities, a nothingness.

Henning (1951, p 46) describes how Zoroaster's dualism supplements his monotheism, by explaining the existence of evil and suffering in the universe:

> Any claim that the world was created by a good and benevolent god must provoke the question why the world, in the outcome, is so very far from good. Zoroaster's answer, that the world had been created by a good god *and* an evil spirit, of equal power, who set out to spoil the good work, is a complete answer: it is a logical answer, more satisfying to the thinking mind than the one given by the author of the Book of Job, who withdrew to the claim that it did not behove man to inquire into the ways of Omnipotence.

At the beginning Zoroastrianism proposed an ethical rather than an ontological dualism: good (*asha*, *vohu*) versus evil

(*druj*, *aka*), rather than spirit (*menog*) versus matter (*etig*). However, as the religion evolved, the dualism extended into the ontological as well. However, the two dualisms were orthogonal to each other. Both good and evil beings could be either spiritual or material (or both). The following is an explanatory diagram from Rose (2011b, p 27):



What is special about Zoroastrian dualism is the role played by human beings. The dualism of Zoroastrianism does not remove the basic problem of monotheism: how could an omni-benevolent and omnipotent God allow so much evil and suffering in the world. However, it does allow that human beings play a very

significant role in the fight against evil. By our choices and our actions we can help the forces of good (Nolan, 2025):

> The battle between Good and Evil has been in process since Time began and will go on till the end of the world: but as the two powers are evenly matched, its outcome is uncertain. The decisive factor will be the collective action of humanity. Enry man or woman is free to choose which side to join: his or her support will add permanent strength to the side chosen, and so, in the long run. the acts of Man will weigh the scales in favour of the one side or the other. Thus Zoroaster, beside his principal two powers, recognizes a third, which, though not of equal rank, holds the balance. (Henning, 1951, pp 45-46).

(iv) Souls and their *Fravashi*

Each human being has a spiritual soul (*urvan*) which exists before birth and which survives the death and decay of the physical body. The *fravashi* are spiritual beings which foster, protect and preserve these individual souls (Boyce, 2015). The concept likely began in relation to the spirits that protect warriors during battle, but in Zoroastrianism, it became applicable to all living things. The *fravashi* are responsible for inserting the soul into the newborn, protecting the individual during his or her life, promoting good thoughts, speech and action, and rescuing the soul after the death of the body. Stausberg (2008, p 38) suggests that they can be considered “guardian angels.”

Various etymologies have been suggested for the word *fravashi* (Boyce 2015). The root *var* can be related to “impregnate,” or to “turn” (which with *fra*, away, could yield the idea of protection), or to “choose” (especially in the sense of confessing a faith).

The relationship between the *fravashi* and the *urvan* is not

clear. In some Zoroastrian writings they are conjoined:

> The developed doctrine came to be that each *fravasi* existed from the beginning of time in a spiritual *(menog)* state; that in due course it was born, clad in a physical body, into this world; and that after death it lived once more in a spiritual state, to be re-united again ultimately with its resurrected physical body. In both the second and third states the *fravasi* tended to be identified with the *urvan,* as these concepts merged. The question then was pondered as to which, in the present state of the world, was the most powerful, the unborn *fravasi,* or that of a living person, or that of a dead one? This again suggests the theorising of priestly schools rather than a point of any popular concern. The Zoroastrian answer was that the *fravasis* of the great men of the faith, whether already dead or not yet born, were the most powerful, but that otherwise the *fjravasis* of the living were the strongest – a doctrine which seems to reflect the profound universal instinct that it is better to be alive in the flesh in the present familiar world than to exist in any other state. (Boyce, 1975, p 128)

(v) The *Faravahar*

The *Faravaha*r or *Farohar* has become a prominent symbol of Zoroastrianism. It has its origins in the winged disk that was used in Ancient Egyptian and Assyrian cultures to denote the power and protection of the sun god. In the *Faravahar*, the winged disk supports a god or person, holding a ring. In this form, the symbol first appears during the Achaemenid era.

The following are photographs of the Tomb of Darius the Great at Naqsh-e Rustam (circe 500 BCE) taken by Richard Stone. The upper photograph is the original and the lower has been enhanced to show the relief carvings. Darius stands before the sacred fire and the *faravahar* symbol floats above.

No one is sure exactly what the *faravahar* symbol means. A common interpretation is that it represents Ahura Mazda. Shahbazi (1974) argues against this since the few accepted representations of Ahura Mazda, such as the previously

illustrated relief at Naqsh-e Rostam, show him holding a *barsom.*

There are actually very few representations of Ahura Mazda. My intuition is that the supreme deity Ahura Mazda is far beyond any portrayal by human hands, and that those supposed depictions more likely represent priests in his service, or one of the *Amesha Spentas* such as *Khshathra Vairya,* who confers temporal powers on worthy human leaders*.*

Another interpretation of the *faravahar* is that the symbol represents the individual human soul and/or its *fravashi*. The following description is along these lines:

> It represents the link between the spiritual and physical worlds. The human form in the center is encircled by a ring that represents the eternal soul. The figure's head reminds people that they have free will, a mind and an intellect with which to choose good. The right hand points upward to lead people toward Asha, the path of Truth. In the left hand is a ring symbolizing the just power of Khshathra Vairya. The figure has wings to help the soul fly upward and progress. It has a tail that serves as a rudder to help the soul balance between the opposing forces of good and evil. These forces are represented by the curved hooks on either side of the tail. The three sections of the tail, which appear as layers of feathers, remind people of good thoughts, good words, and good deeds. Throughout life, the human soul is caught between good and evil, Truth and the Lie. But with the heavenly help, or wings, of Ahura Mazda, the soul may soar to eternal goodness and light. (Harz, 2004, p 9)

According to this approach, the *faravahars* depicted on the historical reliefs likely represent the the *fravashi* of the king or priest that is the subject of the carving. Shahbazi (1974) argues against this interpretation since the *faravahar* has no individuality. Furthermore, the *fravashi* were initially

considered female whereas the *faravahar* is always male.

Another possibility is that the symbol represents *Khshathra Vairya* the Amesha Spenta of righteous power, who is typically shown holding a ring or diadem.

A final interpretation, and the one that I prefer, is that the *faravahar* symbolizes the concept of *khvarenah* (or *farr* in New Persian) (Shahbazi, 1980; Boyce, 1982, pp 103-105). This is the right to rule conferred by Ahura Mazda upon those deserving dominion over their fellow men. The leader may become radiant (*hvar* means sun), and remain so if he rules in accord with *asha*. The concept of *khvarenah* has also been translated as "divine glory"

In modern times the *faravahar* has been used outside of any religious connotation as a symbol of Iranian nationalism. For example, it formed part of the coat of arms of the Pahlavi dynasty who ruled Iran from 1925 until the Iranian Revolution in 1979.

(vi) Eschatology

Ultimately, Zoroastrians believe that the struggle between good and evil will be won by the forces of good, and the universe will be renewed (Moazami, 2000; Kreyenbroek, 2002; Staussberg, 2008, pp 39-42; Cereti, 2015). This is the doctrine of *frashokereti* (Avestan, making into initial state, restoration; Middle Persian *frashgird*).

When the end-times draw near, a virgin will bathe in the waters of *Kayanse*, a mythical lake that preserves the seed of Zoroaster, and will conceive the savior *Saoshiant* (he who brings strength), who will lead the forces of good. The savior is also named *Astvat-ereta* – 'the one through whom *Asha* has bones' (Rose, 2011b, p 44). He will defeat Angra Mainyu in battle, and will cause all who have died to be resurrected.

> The Saoshyant will bring about the Resurrection, and will hold an assembly of all men and women in which they will realize their good and wicked deeds. There will be a Final Judgment and those to whom sin still clings will undergo another short period of punishment in hell (this time not as spirits but in the material body), while the righteous will again enjoy the delights of paradise. Then all the metal contained in the mountains of the earth will be melted. A river of molten metal will thus be formed, through which all men must pass; for those who are free of sins, this will be like a bath in warm milk, but those whose sins have not been completely atoned for will experience a fierce burning. All men, thus cleansed, will then meet together and praise Ohrmazd. (Kreyenbroek, 2002, p 46).

There are clear similarities between these Zoroastrian prophecies, which were most fully developed during the Achaemenid era, and the concepts of the Messiah that developed in Judaism at about the same time, and which significantly affected Christianity. Which of the prophecies came first, and how each tradition contributed to the other is not known (Hultgard in Stausberg, 2008, pp 106-110).

Mary Boyce notes that the ideas of an end-time and of a final judgement distinguishes Zoroastrianism from the prevalent idea of eternal reincarnation that is the basis of Hinduism and Buddhism.

> With this belief in an end to human history Zoroaster appears to have made another profound break with pagan ideas, whereby (to judge from the Vedas) the generations of men were seen as succeeding one another remorselessly like waves of the sea. The strong sense inculcated by Zoroaster of both time and purpose, of all mankind and all *spenta* being striving towards a common end, a foreseeable goal, has been held by some to be the most remarkable characteristic of his teachings. (Boyce, 1975, p 233).

Another intriguing aspect of the Zoroastrian view of the final judgment is that it provides universal access to paradise. A logical problem in the Christian account of judgment is why an omnibenevolent God would not forgive everyone. In the Zoroastrian account, the good are quickly taken into the new world and those tainted by sin can have their evil erased by some sort of painful purification. The rewards offered in Zoroastrianism are quasi-universal:

The righteous who are barely affected by purification and those who become entirely good without impinging on their continued survival are saved and have the best outcome. Those who undergo so much change in the purification process that it is not entirely determinate whether the post-purification person is the same as the person before purification, and in extreme cases, it is determinate that a new person emerges from the process, albeit one who retains important continuities with the pre-purification individual. (Nolan, 2025, pp 49-50)

There are similarities here to the Catholic concept of Purgatory. However, access to Purgatory is only allowed to Christian believers who repent. Non-believers and those who do not repent remain eternally damned.

Zoroastrian Practices

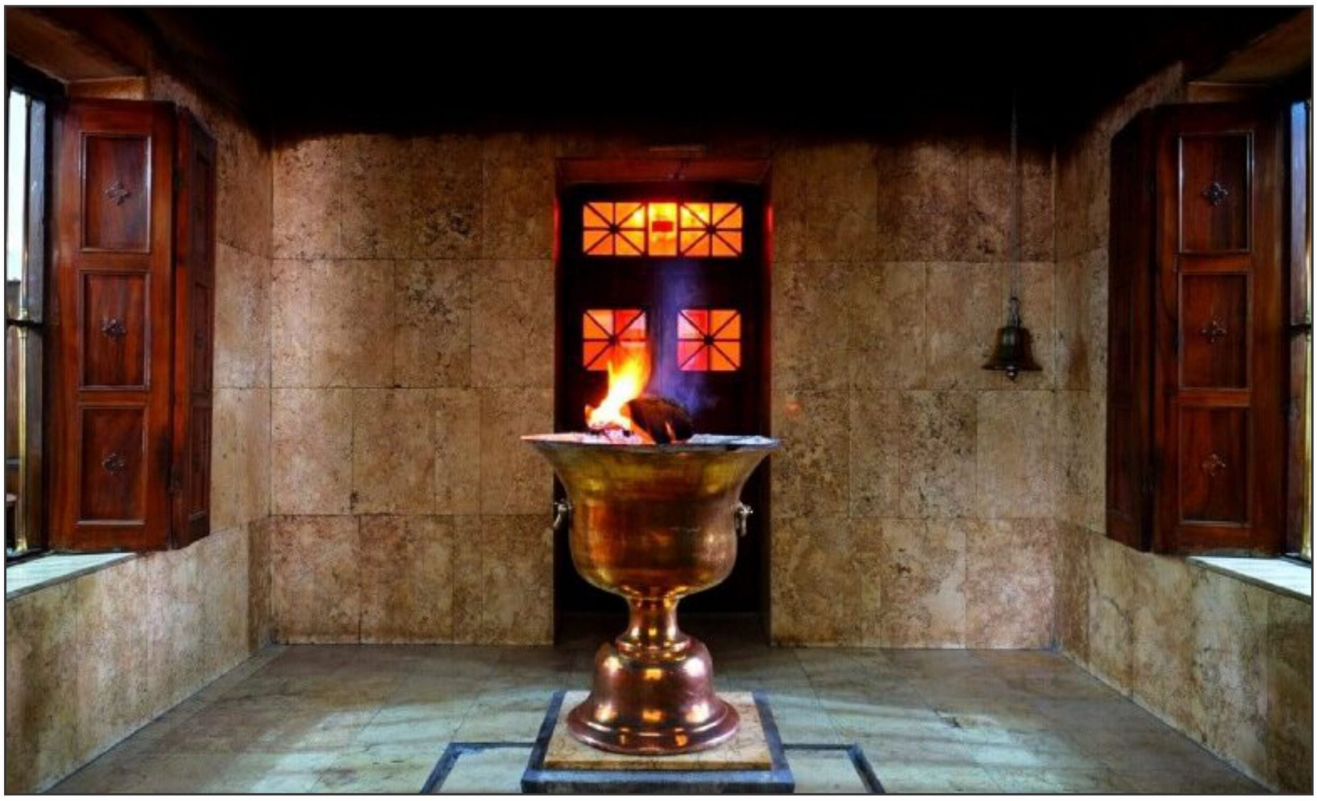
(i) Fire Temples

Fire (*atar*) is an essential component of all Zoroastrian rituals and religious ceremonies:

> The flame is considered to be the visible sign of Ahura Mazda's presence, the symbol of his truth *(asha).* According to tradition, fire was used by Ahura Mazda in the creation of cattle and human beings … and fire will be used again by him when he brings about the final renovation of the

universe. (Nigosian, 1993, p 112).

In Zoroastrian fire-temples, an eternal fire was kept burning so that worshippers could at any time be in the presence of Ahura Mazda. The fire burns during the *Yazna*, a ceremony wherein the priest recites passages from the Avestan scriptures. The following shows the consecrated flame in a fire-temple in Yazd in central Iran:



The fire must be protected from pollution. Only clean and dry wood (typically sandalwood) should be placed on the fire. Priests tending the fire wear masks so that their mortal breath does not reach the flames.

(ii) Burial

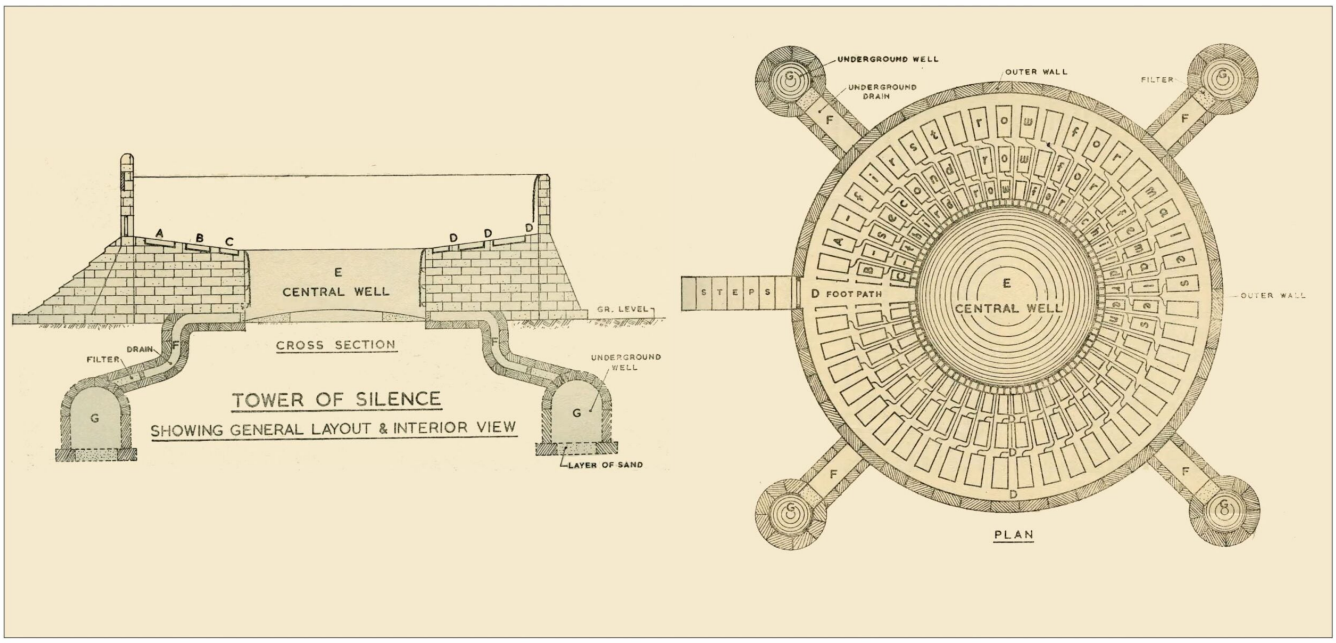
Zoroastrians did not cremate their dead for such a process would defile the fire which they hold sacred. They also did not bury their dead, for such a process would pollute the earth. They resorted to “excarnation:” leaving the corpse out for carrion birds to cleanse. In ancient times this was done in open areas of desert. After the Islamic invasion, Zoroastrians constructed specially raised buildings called *dakhma* (towers of silence) for their dead (Boyce, 1975, pp 325-330; Russell, 2013). These were generally located upon small hilltops.

After the funeral rites the corpse was taken by *dakhma* attendants and laid out on beds arranged in circles around a central pit. Male bodies were relegated to the outer circle, female bodies to the next circle and the bodies of children

were placed in the inner circle. After several days vultures will have stripped the bones of their decaying flesh. The bones are then raked into the central pit where they will be cleansed by the rains. Over time the cleansed bones will disintegrate and be washed by the rains into wells, whence their dust will return to the earth.

Most of the *dakhmas* in Iran have not been active since the Middle Ages. A few survived but their usage was declared illegal in the 1970s. The Parsis community in Mumbai maintained *dakhmas* in the suburbs of the city. The first tower was consecrated in 1670. With the spread of urbanization and the decline in the population of scavenger birds, these have become inactive (Karkaris, 2015).

The following diagram shows a cross-section and a bird's eye view of a *dakhma*



The following illustration shows two views of the *dakhma* at Yazd in Iran, the first from above and the second from below.

.

Nowadays most Zoroastrians are buried in the ground in concrete-sealed tombs to prevent any contamination of the

earth by the decaying corpse.

Descendants of Zoroastrianism

(i) Mithraism

Mithra persisted as a divinity (*yazata*) throughout Zoroastrianism. He is frequently considered as co-equal with Ahura Mazda, and it is often difficult to determine whether a particular representation is of one or the other. The following is a relief sculpture from Taq-e Bostan, near Kermanshah, that was made in the 4th Century CE to commemorate the investiture of Ardashir II who reigned as Shahanshah from 379-383 CE. He was the brother of the Shapur the great who had reigned from 309-379 CE. The relief also celebrates the victory of the Sasanians over the Roman forces of Emperor Julian, who died on his ill-fated expedition into Persia in 363 CE.

The figure on the left represents Mithra, shining with the radiance of the sun. Mithra stands upon a lotus. This might perhaps be related to the influence of Buddhism which had spread from India into the eastern regions of the Sasanian Empire. The figure in the center is Ardashir II. There is some debate about the figure on the right. Some consider this to be Ahura Mazda who is giving the diadem of power to Ardashir. Most current interpretations suggest that it is Shapur the Great who was the Emperor before Ardashir II. At the feet of the two emperors is the defeated body of the Roman Emperor Julian.

The Roman legions fought long and exhaustive campaigns against the Parthians from 54 BCE to 217 CE, and these wars continued when the Parthians were replaced by the Sasanians. As early as the 1st Century CE, Roman Legionnaires established a secret society based on Mithras, the divinity of their enemies in these Persian Wars (Boyce, 1989, pp 469-490). Mithras, the God of the Sun, was known to be never defeated (*Sol Invictus*). As such he had obvious appeal to military men. The society initiates were known as the *syndexi,* "the men who join hands" (Fear, 2022).

Unfortunately, we know little about the nature of this society or of its beliefs. Its inner workings were only understood by

its initiates, and these were sworn to secrecy. The main evidence for the society comes from the numerous temples – Mithraea – that have been unearthed throughout the Roman Empire. Each Mithraeum was constructed in a cave, or in a building made to imitate a cave. Initiates gathered there to worship Mithra and to celebrate a communal meal.

An essential part of the Mithraeum was either a fresco or a carving of Mithra slaying a bull, the "tauroctony." The following illustration shows a marble bas-relief of the tauroctony found at Fiano Romano near Rome, and now at the Louvre museum in Paris. The carving which dates to the 2nd or 3rd Century CE is not large: 62 cm high and 67 cm wide. The figure of Mithra wears a Phrygian cap. This type of headgear with its forward pointing tip was named after a region of Anatolia, although it was commonly worn throughout the Persian Empire. Mithras half-straddles a bull that has been forced to the ground. The bull appears in profile, with its head on the viewers' right. With his left hand, Mithras pulls back the head of the bull by the nostrils, and with his right hand, Mithras plunges a short sword into the shoulder of the bull. Mithras turns away from the bull and looks back over his right shoulder to the Sun in the upper left. A raven is with the sun. The Moon is represented in the upper right. A scorpion, serpent, and dog attack the bull from below. The bull's tale ends in ears of wheat.

Many have tried to interpret what is symbolized by the various elements of the tauroctony. Although there might be some astrological significance to the scorpion, snake and dog, most scholars feel that the general intent is to depict some divine act that provides for human salvation:

> It appears that just like the crucifixion in Christianity, the slaying of the bull was seen as opening up a path to salvation that was previously closed. The teachings of how that path had been closed in the past and why the bull needed to be sacrificed to restore the link are tragically lost to us (Fear, 2022, p 181)

The Bundahishn, a Middle Persin Zoroastrian text, recounts how a Ahura Mazda sacrificed a bull (or ox) at the beginning of creation (Chapter 3). However, another sacrifice occurs at the time of the Final Judgment during *frashokereti:*

> Soshyant, with his assistants, performs a Yazishn ceremony in preparing the dead, and they slaughter the ox Hadhayosh in that Yazishn; from the fat of that ox and the white Haoma they prepare Hush, and give it to all men, and all men become immortal for ever and everlasting. (Bundahishn, 30, 25) (also discussed in Moazami, 20000

The tauroctony might therefore represent the longing for the end-times when men will finally become immortal. If so, the slaying of the bull in the Mithraeum would serve a similar purpose to the depiction of the crucified Christ above the altar in a Christian Church.

Mithraism came to its end when Christianity was accepted as the state religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th Century CE. The mystery religion had lasted for three centuries.

(ii) Mani and Manichaeism

The prophet Mani was born in Ctesiphon (near modern Baghdad) in the Parthian Empire in 216 CE. His father was a Jewish Christian. In his youth Mani travelled to India and became aware to Buddhist teachings. He considered himself the Paraclete that Christ claimed would come to comfort his people, though the Paraclete is generally interpreted to be the Holy Spirit. He preached a new teaching that combined ideas from Zoroastrianism and Christianity. Mani was tolerated by the Sasanian Emperor Shapur I but Bahram I was a zealous Zoroastrian and persecuted the Manichaeans. Mani was imprisoned and died in 274 CE.

Manichaeism was considered a heresy by the Christian Church

and his works were destroyed. He taught a stark dualism between the good spiritual world of light and the evil material world of darkness (Widengren, 1965; Levy, 2005). He urged his followers to renounce the world so that their souls could return to the domain of light after the death of their worldly bodies. Manichaeism became widespread in the Roman Empire. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) was a Manichaean before he converted to orthodox Christianity. Much of what we know about Manichaeism comes from Augustine's writings that refute of their beliefs. Manichaeism largely died out in the Roman Empire after Christianity became the state religion in the 4th Century CE, but it persisted in regions of central Asia such as Bactria and in western China.

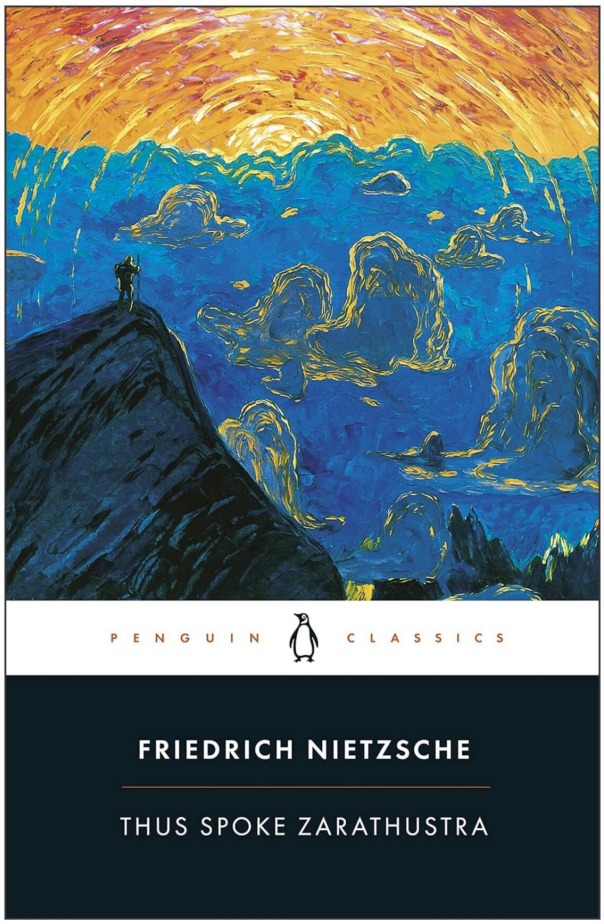
The dualistic beliefs of Manichaeism also persisted in the west in small groups of believers such as the Bogomils in Bulgaria in the 10th Century CE and the Cathars in southern France between the 12th and 14th Centuries CE.

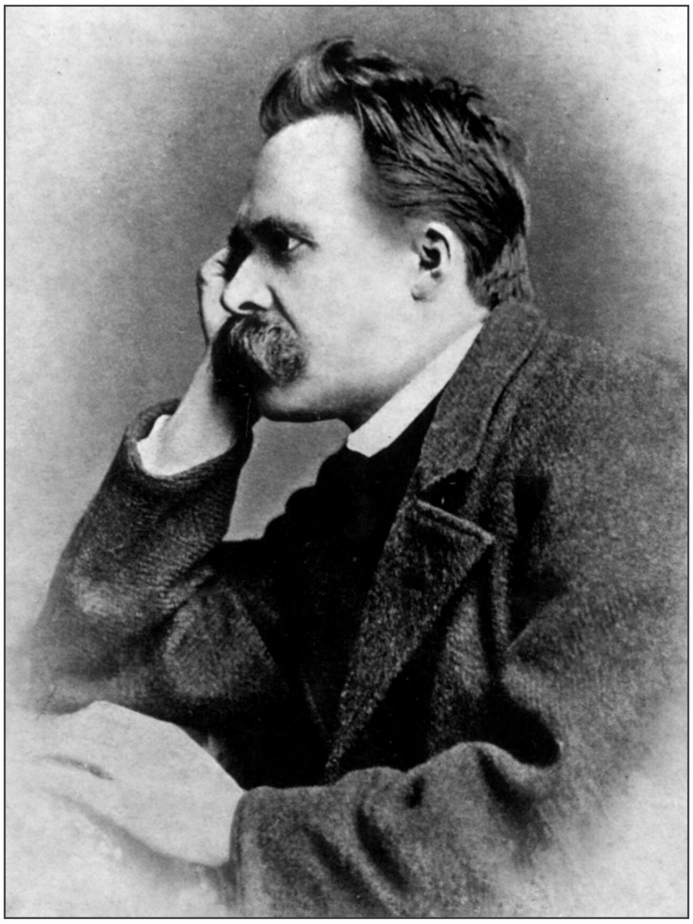
The dualism of Mani differed from that of Zoroaster in that it was "anti-cosmic" rather than "pro-cosmic" (Boyce, 1975, p 230). Mani believed that physical world was irretrievably evil, and that human souls were painfully imprisoned in their physical bodies. By renouncing all worldly desires, they could hope to be released at death back into the spiritual world – the realm of light. Zoroaster believed the physical world basically good and that, although it was now tainted by evil, it was ultimately redeemable. At the Final Resurrection, souls would be rejoined to their now perfect physical bodies.

The following illustration shows on the left a small rock-crystal seal from the 3rd Century CE with a representation of the prophet Mani. This might have been used by Mani to seal his letters with wax. On the right is a manuscript fragment from the 8th to 9th Centuries CE found in Western China showing Manichaean monks.

(iii) Thus Spake Zarathustra

Between 1883 and 1885, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) wrote what was to become his most famous book: *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (Thus Spake Zarathustra). The following illustration shows a photographic portrait of Nietzsche taken in 1882 by Gustav Adolf Schultze, and the cover of the Penguin edition of the book during the 1960s with its evocative cover: *Sunset Mount Blanc* by Wenzel Hablik (1906).





For many people, their first introduction to Zarathustra comes through this book. Unfortunately, the book has nothing to do with ancient prophet or the religion that he founded.

Nietzsche was aware of the basic principles of Zoroastrianism through classic authors such as Herodotus and Plutarch, and he may have been familiar with some translations of their early scriptures. Nevertheless, the fictional Zarathustra does not proclaim the beliefs of Zoroastrianism. Rather, Nietzsche's Zarathustra wishes to correct what he (or Nietzsche) believed was his great mistakes: the distinction between Good and Evil, and the subsequent foundation of human morality (Aiken, 2003; Ashouri, 2012; Pippin, 2012).

Nietzsche describes this purpose in his autobiographical *Ecce Homo*, written in 1888, just before his mental breakdown, but only published posthumously. The following quotation about Zarathustra shares the verbose and vainglorious character of the rest of the book. The reference to shooting well with

arrows comes from Herodotus.

> I have not been asked, as I should have been asked, what the name Zarathustra means in precisely my mouth, in the mouth of the first immoralist: for what constitutes the tremendous uniqueness of that Persian in history is precisely the opposite of this. Zarathustra was the first to see in the struggle between good and evil the actual wheel in the working of things: the translation of morality into the realm of metaphysics, as force, cause, end-in-itself, is his work. But this question is itself at bottom its own answer. Zarathustra created this most fateful of errors, morality: consequently he must also be the first to recognize it. Not only has he had longer and greater experience here than any other thinker – the whole of history is indeed the experimental refutation of the proposition of a so-called 'moral world-order' –: what is more important is that Zarathustra is more truthful than any other thinker. His teaching, and his alone, upholds truthfulness as the supreme virtue – that is to say, the opposite of the cowardice of the 'idealist', who takes flight in face of reality; Zarathustra has more courage in him than all other thinkers put together. To tell the truth and *to shoot well with arrows*: that is Persian virtue. – Have I been understood? The self-overcoming of morality through truthfulness, the self-overcoming of the moralist into his opposite – into me – that is what the name Zarathustra means in my mouth. (Nietzsche, translated by Hollingdale, pp, 124-5)

Nietzsche had much to say in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, and his attempt to do so through the words and actions of an ancient prophet is wildly creative. However, the book is an incoherent mixture of parables and folktales, that veers erratically from parody to tragedy. Most of its ideas are better expressed in Nietzsche's other books.

Nietzsche's main goal was to argue against the "slave-

morality" that had taken hold of society, a morality that promoted humility rather than accomplishment, conformity rather than initiative, weakness rather than strength. He proposed that rather than doing what others want, we should achieve what we can, accept our destiny, fulfill the possibilities within ourselves, and become an *Ubermensch:* "your love of your neighbour is your bad love of yourselves" (Part I:16, Hulse translation p 52*).* Good versus evil (*böse*) is replaced by good versus bad (*schlecht*, often used in the sense of "poorly made, shoddy"). This is a morality based on aesthetics rather than on good and evil (Poellner, 2012; Kronman, 2019).

Unfortunately, Nietzsche did not foresee what this new morality might entail. The Nazis took his ideas to heart, threw off all constraints, and tried to create a world that fulfilled what they considered their destiny (Golomb & Wistrich, 2002).

Modern man has found that world can be understood without the need to postulate a god, and that morality need not follow divine commandments. Nietzsche had famously proposed the idea that "God is dead" in his book *The Gay Science* (1882). In *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, Nietzsche realized the implications of this idea: "Nothing is true; everything is permitted" (Part IV: 9, Hulse translation, p 259). Ivan Karamazov voices a similar fear in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) which was published at about the same time as *Also Sprach Zarathustra*: "If God does not exist, anything is permissible."

Another concept that occurs toward the end of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* involves the circularity of time: that the world continually returns to what it once was and everything recurs:

> All truth is crooked. Time itself is a circle…Must we not all have been here before – and must we not come again … must we not keep coming back forever. (Part III:2, Hulse

translation, pp 146-147)

The idea that time is circular is common in Hinduism and Buddhism, which propose that the universe eternally recurs in cycles lasting many millennia. However, the Zoroastrianism concept of time is linear: the world is created, the world suffers though the battle between good and evil, and with the defeat of evil the world once again becomes as perfect as it was when it was created. One might suggest that this process could then repeat, but that is not really part of the Zoroastrian world view.

Nietzsche becomes reconciled to the eternal recurrence by proposing a variant of Kant's categorical imperative: that one should live one's life in such a manner that one would wish to live it in the same way when it is eternally repeated.

Nietzche's fictional Zarathustra is both intriguing and frustrating, both charming and frightening. However he is interpreted, he is a far cry from the legendary prophet who founded a new religion based on the struggle between good and evil.

Conclusion

The world is composed of opposites: good and evil, order and chaos, growth and decay, truth and deceit. Zoroaster described this state in terms of the struggle between two opposing forces. One of the appealing aspects of the religion that he founded is its optimism: good will ultimately prevail over evil. Another is the importance of humanity to the outcome of this struggle. By choosing good over evil, we can tilt the balance between the opposing forces and accelerate the final victory.

The religion of Zoroastrianism has persisted for about three millennia, although the number of its present adherents is

vanishingly small in comparison to the dominant religions of the world. Nevertheless, it remains worth our while to remember the ideas of the ancient prophet: to do as much good as we can, to contemplate the fire, and to look forward to when *asha* once again rules the universe.

Ashem vohu
vahishtem asti
ushta asti
ushta ahmai
hyat ashai vahishtai ashem

References

Ahmadi, A. (2013). The Twins Stanza, Y 30.3. *Iranian Studies*, *46*(2), 227–249.

Ahmadi, A. (2015). What is aša? *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, *78*(2), 293–315.

Aiken, D. (2003). Nietzsche and his Zarathustra: A Western poet's transformation of an Eastern priest and prophet. *Zeitschrift für Religions und Geistesgeschichte*, *55*(4), 335–353.

Ashouri, D. (2012). Nietzsche and Persia. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

Boyce, M. (1969). On Mithra's part in Zoroastrianism. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, *32*(1), 10–34.

Boyce, M. (1975, revised 1989). *A history of Zoroastrianism. Volume 1. The early period*. E. J. Brill.

Boyce, M., (1982). *A history of Zoroastrianism. Volume 2. Under the Achaemenians.* E. J. Brill.

Boyce, M., Grenet, F, & Beck, R. (1991). *A history of*

Zoroastrianism. Volume 3. Zoroastrianism under Macedonian and Roman rule. E. J. Brill.

Boyce, M. (2015) Fravaši. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

Cereti, C. G. (2015). Myths, legends, eschatologies. In Stausberg, M., Vevaina, Y. S.-D., & Tessmann, A. (Eds.) *The Wiley-Blackwell companion to Zoroastrianism*. (pp 259-272). Wiley.

Choksy, J. K. (2018). Zoroastrianism. II. Historical review: from the Arab conquest to modern times. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

Fear, A. T. (2022). *Mithras*. Routledge.

Ferrero, M. (2021). From polytheism to monotheism: Zoroaster and some economic theory. *Homo Oeconomicus*, *38*(1–4), 77–108.

Gnoli, G. (2017). Dualism. *Encyclopaedia Iranica.*

Gnuse, R. K. (1997). *No other gods: emergent monotheism in Israel*. Sheffield Academic Press.

Golomb, J., & Wistrich, R. S. (2002). *Nietzsche, godfather of fascism? On the uses and abuses of a philosophy*. Princeton University Press.

Hartz, P. R. (2004). *Zoroastrianism*. Facts on File

Heggarty, P., Anderson, C., Scarborough, M., King, B., Bouckaert, R., Jocz, L., Kümmel, M. J., Jügel, T., Irslinger, B., Pooth, R., Liljegren, H., Strand, R. F., Haig, G., Macák, M., Kim, R. I., Anonby, E., Pronk, T., Belyaev, O., Dewey-Findell, T. K., … Gray, R. D. (2023). Language trees with sampled ancestors support a hybrid model for the origin of Indo-European languages. *Science , 381*(6656), eabg0818.

Henning, W. B. (1951). *Zoroaster. Politician or witch-doctor?* Oxford University Press

Hinnells, J. R., & Williams, A. (Eds.) (2007). *Parsis in India and the diaspora*. Routledge.

Hintze, A. (2014a). Monotheism the Zoroastrian way. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, *24*(2), 225–249.

Hintze, A. (2014b) FRAŠŌ.KƎRƎTI. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

Irani, K. D. (1990). The concept of Asha (a philosophical analysis). In D. G. McIntyre *An Introduction to the Gathas of Zarathushtra.*

Karkaria, B. (2015). Death in the city: How a lack of vultures threatens Mumbai's 'Towers of Silence' *The Guardian*, Jan 26, 2015

Kreyenbroek, P. (2002). Millennialism and eschatology in the Zoroastrian tradition. In A. Amanat & M. Bernhardsson (Ed.). *Imagining the end: visions of apocalypse from the Ancient Middle East to Modern America* (pp. 33–55). I.B.Tauris.

Kronman, A. T. (2019). The world as an aesthetic phenomenon: art, truth and morality in Nietzsche's philosophy. In *Confessions of a Born-Again Pagan*. (pp. 779–810). Yale University Press.

Levy, D. J. (2005). The religion of light: on Mani and Manichaeism. In Eisenstadt, S. N., Árnason, J. P., & Wittrock, B. (Eds.) *Axial civilizations and world history.* (pp 319-336). E. J. Brill.

Litvinsky, B. A. Jalilov A. H. & Kolesnikov A. I. (1996). The Arab Conquest. In Zhang Guand-da, Litvinsky, B., & Shabani Samghabadi, R. (Eds) *History of civilizations of Central Asia. Volume III. The crossroads of civilization. AD 250 to 750*. (pp 450-475). UNESCO.

Malandra, W. W. (2015). Zoroastrianism. I. Historical review up to the Arab conquest. Encyclopaedia Iranica

Malandra, W. W. (2015). Zoroaster. II. General Survey. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*

Moazami, M. (2000). Millennialism, eschatology, and messianic figures in Iranian tradition. J. *Journal of Millennial Studies* (Winter).

Nietzsche, F. W. (1885, translated by A. Tille, 1908). *Thus spake Zarathustra, a book for all and none.* Allen & Unwin.

Nietzsche, F. W. (1885, translated by M. Hulse, 2022). *Thus spake Zarathustra, a book for all and none.* Notting Hill Editions.

Nietzsche, F. W. (1888, translated by Hollingdale, R. J.,1981). *Ecce homo: how one becomes what one is*. Penguin Books.

Nigosian, S. A. (1993). *The Zoroastrian faith: tradition and modern research*. McGill-Queens University Press.

Nolan, D. (2025). *Zoroastrianism and contemporary philosophy*. Cambridge University Press.

Poellner, P. (2012). Aestheticist ethics. In Christopher Janaway, C. & Robertson, S. (Eds.) *Nietzsche, Naturalism, and Normativity*. (pp 52-80). Oxford University Press.

Ritter, N. (2010). Human-headed winged bull (*aladlammu*), *Iconography of Deities and Demons*.

Rose, J. (2011a). *Zoroastrianism: a guide for the perplexed*. Continuum.

Rose, J. (2011b). *Zoroastrianism: an introduction*. I.B. Tauris.

Russell, J. R. (2013). Burial iii. In Zoroastrianism. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*

Schlerath, B., & Skjærvø, P. O. (2018). A□a. *Encyclopaedia*

Iranica.

Shahbazi, A. S. (1974). An Achaemenid Symbol. I: A Farewell to ‘Fravahr’ and ‘Ahuramazda’ *Archäologische Mitteilungen ans Iran*, 7, 135–44.

Shahbazi, A. S. (1980). An Achaemenid Symbol II. Farnah ‘(God given) Fortune’ symbolised. Archäologische Mitteilungen ans Iran 13, 119–47

Skjærvø, P. O. (2011). *The spirit of Zoroastrianism*. Yale University Press.

Stausberg, M. (2008). *Zarathustra and Zoroastrianism: a short introduction*. Equinox Pub.

Vevaina, Y S.-D. (2015). Theologies and hermeneutics. In Stausberg, M., Vevaina, Y. S.-D., & Tessmann, A. (Eds.) *The Wiley-Blackwell companion to Zoroastrianism*. (pp 211-234). Wiley.

Widengren, G. (1961, translated C. Kessler, 1965). *Mani and manichaeism*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

T. S. Eliot: The Cocktail Party

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) wrote *The Cocktail Party* in 1948. The play begins with people making foolish conversation at a cocktail party but soon proceeds to a discussion of what it means to be married to another person, and what is required to become a saint. It was initially performed at the Edinburgh

Festival in 1949 with Alec Guiness as the Unidentified Guest and Irene Worth as Celia, the prospective saint, and then moved to Broadway in 1950, where it received a Tony Award for Best Play. Critical reviews were mixed, but audiences were more enthusiastic. The play was revived briefly in 1968 with Guinness as both director and actor.

Synopsis

The play opens on the remnants of a cocktail party. The hostess Lavinia Chamberlayne had been called away, and her husband Edward had tried to cancel the party, but had been unable to contact some of the invitees: two elderly guests Julia and Alex, two youngsters, Celia and Peter, and one unidentified guest not known to the others, who enjoys his gin and water and listens bemused to the cocktail chatter. The party soon breaks up, but Edward asks the unidentified guest to stay behind because he needs someone to talk to. He confesses that Lavinia has left him. After some discussion he realizes that, although he has toyed with the idea of freedom, he wants her to return. The unidentified guest promises to bring Lavinia back the next day and leaves, singing a verse from the Irish song *One-Eyed Riley*:

> Unidentified Guest: *As I was drinkin’ gin and water,*
> *And me bein’ the One-Eyed Riley,*
> *Who came in but the landlord’s daughter*
> *And she took my heart entirely.*
>
> You will keep our appointment?
>
> Edward: I shall keep it.
>
> Unidentified Guest: *Tooryooly toory-iley,*
> *What’s the matter with One-Eyed Riley*

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/one-eyed-riley.mp3

This and subsequent audio clips are from the Decca recording of the play. Some sections of the play were omitted for the recording which was limited to the length of two LPs.

Other guests return with various excuses, but mainly because they wish to talk to Edward. Peter wants his advice about Celia, with whom he has become enamoured though she does not return his feelings. Edward suggests that Peter accept the fact that that romance is not going anywhere, and that Peter should go to California to pursue his dreams of working in film. After Peter leaves, Celia returns to talk to Edward, and we realize that she and Edward have been having an affair. However, now that Lavinia has apparently left Edward and made him available, Celia realizes that she does not wish to continue their relationship.

The next afternoon everyone returns to the Chamberlayne's. Lavinia in brought back to Edward as promised by the unidentified guest. The other guests have been summoned by telegram. Peter has decided to leave to work in films in California. Celia says goodbye to Peter and to the Chamberlaynes, Lavinia and Edward are left alone to discuss their relationship. Lavinia suggests that her husband should see a psychiatrist.

The play then skips to several weeks later at the consulting offices of the unidentified guest, who it turns out is the psychiatrist Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly. We find out the Julia and Alex have worked with Sir Henry to get Edward, Lavinia, and Celia to come to his office. Initially Sir Henry talks with Edward alone and then Lavinia is brought in. Lavinia and Edward discuss their relationship. Lavina knew about Edward's affair, but Edward had not realized that Lavinia had at the same time been infatuated with young Peter. Both now have no one to love but themselves, and they decide to return home together.

Celia then comes in to consult with Sir Henry. She explains

that she has begun to feel “an awareness of solitude,” a separation from a world with which she has become disillusioned. Furthermore, she has experienced a “sense of sin” that does not seem to have much to do with morality. Rather it appears to be a feeling that he is not doing what she was meant to do. She needs something to devote herself to. Sir Henry agrees to help her find her calling. After Celia leaves, Julia and Alex return and the three toast together, first to Lavinia and Edward with the “words for the building of the hearth,” and then to Celia with the “words for those who go upon a journey.”

The Guardians mention Peter as also needing their help. Perhaps he might represent a separate road to salvation – that of the artist.

The final act of the play occurs two years later just before another cocktail party at the Chamberlaynes. The same people are there as in the first act. We learn that Lavinia and Edward remain together, and that Peter has become successful in films. Alex reports that Celia had joined an austere Christian nursing order and had gone to Kinkanja to care for patients dying from a pestilence. Agitators had convinced the natives that they could only stop the pestilence by slaughtering the Christians. During the subsequent insurrection, Celia had been crucified on an anthill. Lavinia asks Sir Henry why he appears unconcerned about this, and he confesses that when he first met Celia he had a premonition of her violent death, He had not known exactly how this would occur, but he had acquiesced to Celia’s decision and prepared her for her destiny.

Julia, Alex and Sir Henry leave to attend another party. The other guests remain as the Chamberlayne’s cocktail party begins.

The following illustration shows a 1948 photograph of Eliot by Walter Stoneman on the left and photographs of Alec Guiness

and Irene Worth from the original New York production on the right.

Sources for the Play

In his 1951 essay on *Poetry and Drama*, Eliot noted that he had used Euripides' *Alcestis* (438 BCE) "as a point of departure" for *The Cocktail Party*. In Euripides, in gratitude for the hospitality shown to him, Apollo had granted king Admetus the privilege of living past the time the Fates had decreed for his death. The only problem was that someone else had to die in his place. Admetus' devoted wife Alcestis agrees to take his place. Apollo tries to get Thanatos, the God of Death, not

to take Alcestis, but Death is implacable. Apollo then asks Heracles to wrestle with Death and brings Alcestis back to Admetus. Eliot clearly takes from Euripides the story of Edward and Lavinia's relationship. And we must presume that the unidentified guest in the first act is Heracles, a hero who liked to drink and to sing.

As the play progresses, the ideas of Heraclitus (c 500 BCE) come to the fore (Jones, 1960, p 132; Lesher, 2013). Just before he returns Lavinia to Edward, the unidentified guest points out that everything and everyone changes – you cannot step twice into the same river.

> Ah, but we die to each other daily.
> What we know of other people
> Is only our memory of the moments
> During which we knew them. And they have changed since then.
> To pretend that they and we are the same
> Is a useful and convenient social convention
> Which must sometimes be broken. We must also remember
> That at every meeting we are meeting a stranger.

In his play Eliot grafts onto these Classical ideas the Christian narrative of Celia's martyrdom. In this, Sir Henry takes the role of a Priest, who stands in place of God, rather than that of a Hero, who acts for the Gods. Celia confesses to him that she has felt a "sense of sin" – something that is completely Christan, and incompatible with Classical ideas. Sir Henry informs Celia of her options and the dangers she might face, before allowing her to choose her vocation. His

> ability to foresee Celia's death is similar to the doctrine of free will, in which God can see what will happen, but where the choice is still up to the individual (Rexine, 1965, p 25)

Eliot may have also used several modern sources for the ideas

he considered in *The Cocktail Party*. Two recent productions had used a supernatural being to alter the course of human events. In Frank Capra's 1946 film *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey's guardian angel Clarence Odbody talks him out of suicide and convinces him to return to his family (Llorens-Cubedo, 2022). In Eliot's play the supernatural intervention is more austere, and the outcome ultimately tragic, despite the play being called a comedy. In J. B. Priestley's 1947 play *The Inspector Calls*, a police inspector interrupts a family dinner party and points out to those present how their actions had led to the death of a young woman. As the play ends, the inspector vanishes: he was simply a voice asking for justice. Priestley calls out the entitled; Eliot reconciles them to their fate. Alec Guinness had acted as one of the family in the first production of Priestley's play. In J.-P. Sartre's play *Huis Clos* ("No Exit," performed in 1944, published in 1947) one of the main characters exclaims *L'enfer, c'est les autres* ("Hell is other people"). In *The Cocktail Party* Eliot has Edward rebut this claim:

> There was a door
> And I could not open it. I could not touch the handle.
> Why could I not walk out of my prison?
> What is hell? Hell is oneself,
> Hell is alone, the other figures in it
> Merely projections. There is nothing to escape from
> And nothing to escape to. One is always alone.

Edward's description of his state of mind fits more easily with the existentialist idea that we alone are responsible for our actions. As Sartre said in *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* ("Existentialism is a Humanism," 1946), we are "condemned to be free"

The Path to Sainthood

In the second act of the play, Sir Henry, with the assistance of Julia and Alex, reconciles Lavinia and Edward to their life together, and sets Celia on her path to sainthood. Carol Smith (1967, pp 157-158) points out that there are two ways to salvation in Christianity:

> In the history of Christian mysticism from the time of the writings attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, there have traditionally been two paths by which the soul could come to God—the Negative Way and the Affirmative Way. Followers of the Negative Way believe that God may be reached by detaching the soul from the love of all things that are not God, or, in the terms Eliot most frequently chose to use, by following the council of St. John of the Cross to divest oneself of the love of created beings. The Way of Affirmation, on the other hand, consists of the recognition that because the Christian God is immanent as well as transcendent, everything in the created world is an imperfect image of Him. Thus, all created things are to be accepted in love as images of the Divine. The Way of Affirmation, while less rigorous, has its own implicit difficulties, for the price of loving created beings ultimately involves suffering and loss.

Sir Henry brings Lavinia and Edward together and points out to themthat they both had felt a lack of love in their marriage, both had sought out relationships with others, and both had realized that these relationships had no hope of success. They must become reconciled to their own limitations; they must relearn how to live lovingly with each other. Theirs is the Affirmative Way.

Celia presents a completely different problem for Sir Henry. She has two symptoms. The first is “an awareness of solitude:”

> I don’t mean simply
> That there’s been a crash: though indeed there has been.

It isn’t simply the end of an illusion
In the ordinary way, or being ditched.
Of course that’s something that’s always happening
To all sorts of people, and they get over it
More or less, or at least they carry on.
No. I mean that what has happened has made me aware
That I’ve always been alone. That one always is alone.
Not simply the ending of one relationship,
Not even simply finding that it never existed—
But a revelation about my relationship
With *everybody*. Do you know —
It no longer seems worth while to *speak* to anyone!

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/celia-alone.mp3

The second is “a sense of sin”

It’s not the feeling of anything I’ve ever *done*,
Which I might get away from, or of anything in me
I could get rid of—but of emptiness, of failure
Towards someone, or something, outside of myself;
And I feel I must . . . *atone*—is that the word?

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/celia-atone.mp3

Sir Henry informs her that she can return to normal life

The condition is curable.
But the form of treatment must be your own choice:
I cannot choose for you. If that is what you wish,
I can reconcile you to the human condition,
The condition to which some who have gone as far as you
Have succeeded in returning. They may remember
The vision they have had, but they cease to regret it,
Maintain themselves by the common routine,
Learn to avoid excessive expectation,

> Become tolerant of themselves and others,
> Giving and taking, in the usual actions
> What there is to give and take. They do not repine;
> Are contented with the morning that separates
> And with the evening that brings together
> For casual talk before the fire
> Two people who know they do not understand each other,
> Breeding children whom they do not understand
> And who will never understand them.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/condition-is-curable.mp3

Or

> There is another way, if you have the courage.
> The first I could describe in familiar terms
> Because you have seen it, as we all have seen it,
> Illustrated, more or less, in lives of those about us.
> The second is unknown, and so requires faith—
> The kind of faith that issues from despair.
> The destination cannot be described;
> You will know very little until you get there;
> You will journey blind. But the way leads towards possession
> Of what you have sought for in the wrong place.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/another-way.mp3

Celia chooses the second option – the negative way to salvation – and Sir Henry makes the necessary arrangements.

The Guardians

In *The Cocktail Party* the characters of Julia, Alex, and Sir Henry bring about the most important elements of the plot. The

word “guardian” comes up initially when Edward is describing to Celia how some force within him – his “tougher self” – prevents him from changing the course of his life. Later in their conversation Celia wonders whether Julia might be serving as her guardian. At the end of the play’s second scene, Edward and Celia make a toast to the “Guardians.” We are never sure of their roles. They might be angels or magi: spiritual advisers who intervene in a person’s life to make sure that some transcendent goal is attained (Hammerschmidt, 1981). Though the appear to serve some greater good, we are not completely sure that they are not demonic. For want of any clear name, they have come to be known as the “Guardians.”

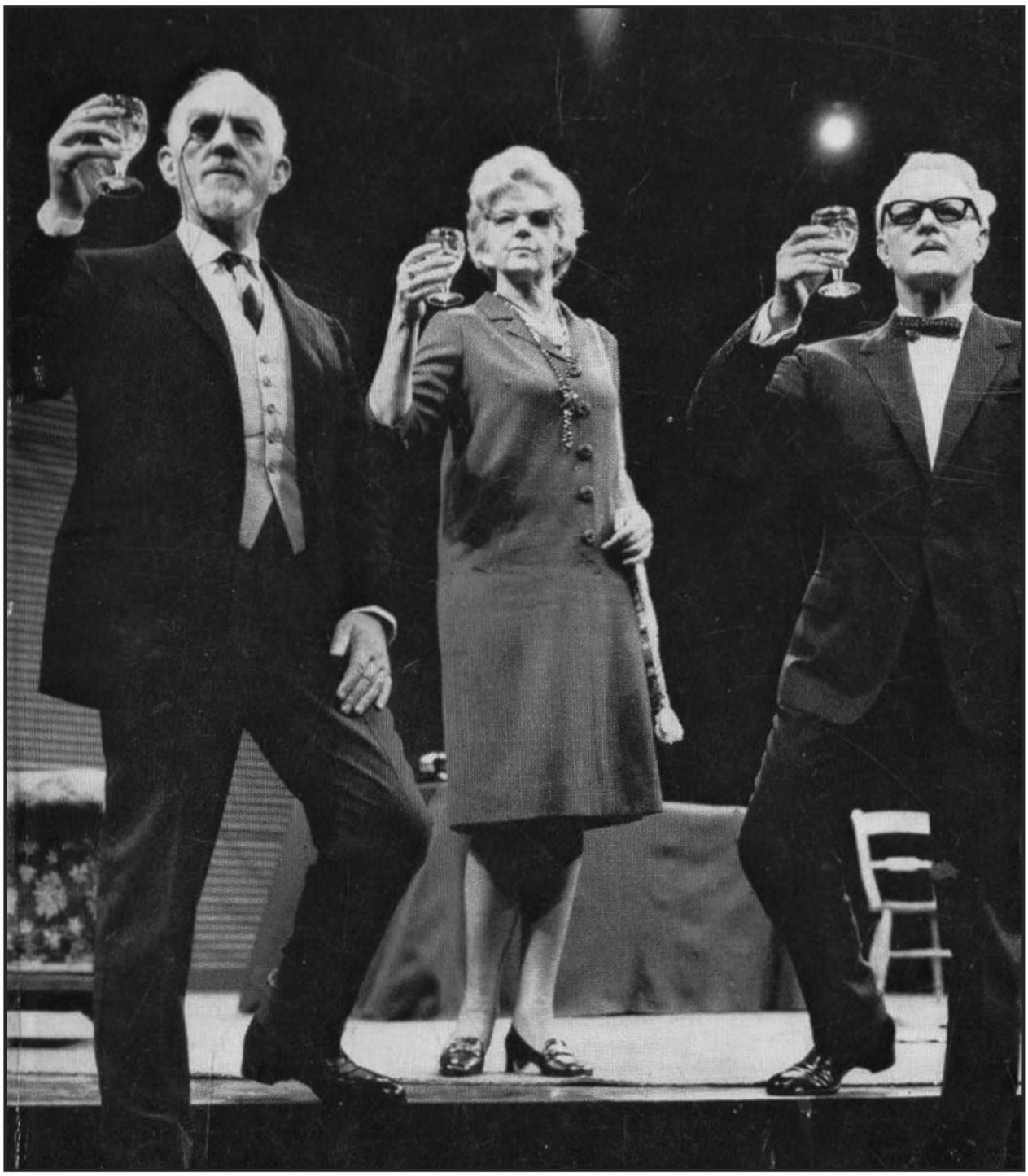
The fact that Sir Henry sings a song about “One-Eyed Riley” raises the idea the “In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king” (Jones, 1960, p 151). This old proverb was collected by Erasmus in his *Adagia* (1500) – *in regione caecorum rex est luscus* – but its origins go back at least as far as the *Genesis Rabbah* (~500 CE). The following illustration (I believe from the 1968 revival at the Chichester Festival) emphasizes this aspect of the guardians: Sir Henry has a monocle, and one of Julia’s eyes is patched. The Guardians are offering a libation to the success of their charges:

> Alex: The words for the building of the hearth.
>
> Sir Henry: Let them build the hearth
> Under the protection of the stars.
>
> Alex: Let them place a chair each side of it.
>
> Julia: May the holy ones watch over the roof,
> May the Moon herself influence the bed.
>
> Alex: The words for those who go upon a journey.
>
> Sir Henry: Protector of travellers
> Bless the road.

Alex: Watch over her in the desert.
Watch over her in the mountain.
Watch over her in the labyrinth.
Watch over her by the quicksand.

Julia: Protect her from the Voices
Protect her from the Visions
Protect her in the tumult
Protect her in the silence.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/libation.mp3



A Meaningless Martyrdom

In the short final act of the play, we learn that Celia had joined an austere nursing order and had travelled to Kinkanja to care for dying patients. The natives had somehow come to believe that she was the cause rather than the cure for the pestilence. Celia had then been crucified on an anthill. Her death appears as meaningless as it was horrible:

> And just for a handful of plague-stricken natives
> Who would have died anyway

Sir Henry appears undisturbed by her death. When challenged by Lavinia he remarks

> When I first met Miss Coplestone, in this room,
> I saw the image, standing behind her chair,
> Of a Celia Coplestone whose face showed the astonishment
> Of the first five minutes after a violent death.
> If this strains your credulity, Mrs. Chamberlayne,
> I ask you only to entertain the suggestion
> That a sudden intuition, in certain minds,
> May tend to express itself at once in a picture.
> That happens to me, sometimes. So it was obvious
> That here was a woman under sentence of death.
> That was her destiny. The only question
> Then was, what sort of death? *I* could not know;
> Because it was for her to choose the way of life
> To lead to death, and, without knowing the end
> Yet choose the form of death. We know the death she chose.
> I did not know that she would die in this way;
> *She* did not know. So all that I could do
> Was to direct her in the way of preparation.
> That way, which she accepted, led to this death.
> And if that is not a happy death, what death is happy?

The story of Celia's death borders on the absurd. The idea that human life is essentially absurd had just been introduced by Albert Camus in his 1942 book *Le mythe de Sisyphe* ("The Myth of Sisyphus"). The main idea is that human life is much like that of Sisyphus, who tried to stop death and make man immortal. His punishment was to roll an immense boulder up to the top of a hill. Just before it reaches the summit, the boulder rolls back down into the valley and Sisyphus must begin his task again. This he must do for all eternity. At the

end of his essay Camus remarks that

> Je laisse Sisyphe au bas de, la montagne! On retrouve toujours son fardeau. Mais Sisyphe enseigne la fidélité supérieure qui nie les dieux et soulève les rochers. Lui aussi juge que toutest bien. Cet univers désormais sans maître ne lui paraît ni stérile ni futile. Chacun des grains de cette pierre, chaque éclat minéral de cette montagne pleine de nuit, à lui seul, forme un monde. La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir un cœur d'homme. Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux.
>
> [I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy].

The following illustration shows a 1920 painting of Sisyphus by the German painter Franz von Stuck:

In the late 1940s and the 1950s plays like Genet's *The Maids* (1947), Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950) and Becket's *Waiting for Godot* (1950) ushered in the theatre of the absurd, wherein human beings learned to survive in a world without meaning. Eliot's play is a harbinger of this type of drama: Celia's fate is absurd – her death served no useful purpose.

The Magus Zoroaster

Sir Henry tries to explain his lack of concern about Celia's death by quoting from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). The lines are spoken by Mother Earth who encourages Prometheus to tell his story but to be aware that there are two worlds – one in which we live, and one which contains our unfulfilled dreams and ideas

> *Ere Babylon was dust*
> *The magus Zoroaster, my dead child,*
> *Met his own image walking in the garden.*
> *That apparition, sole of men, he saw.*
> *For know there are two worlds of life and death:*
> *One that which thou beholdest; but the other*
> *Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit*
> *The shadows of all forms that think and live*
> *Till death unite them and they part no more!*

The next lines (unquoted by Sir Henry) are

> Dreams and the light imaginings of men,
> And all that faith creates or love desires,
> Terrible, strange, sublime and beauteous shapes.

Zoroaaster was a mythical Persian religious leader (magus) who may have lived around 1000 BCE. The story of the meeting with his double marks a time when he realized that he had to live up to what he was meant to be (Ranald & Ranald, 1961).

The story of Zoroaster and his image of what he was meant to be was depicted by the Mexican surrealist painter Leonora Carrington in 1960: The following illustration shows her painting. The two enlargements on the right show the supernatural powers (bull and lion), and the mirror writing on the ground that quotes from Shelley. The latter has been lightened and mirror-inverted to make the text legible. The

conflict between goodness and evil appear to be represented by the bird and snake at the feet of Zoroaster.

The Problems of Sainthood

As the 20th Century came to an end, the idea of the saint devoting himself or herself to the poor and dying became a little tarnished. Probably the most famous of the modern saints was Mother Teresa (1910-1997), who devoted her life to the poor of Calcutta.

The journalist Christopher Hitchens criticized her contributions in a TV program entitled *Mother Teresa: Hell's Angel* (1994). The following are two excerpts:

> Mother Teresa's cult of death and suffering depends for its effect on the most vulnerable and helpless: abandoned babies, say, or the terminally ill, who supply the occasion for charity and the raw material for compassion. (near minute 6).
>
> The Teresa cult is now a missionary multinational with an annual turnover over tens of millions. If concentrated in Calcutta, that would certainly support a large hospital and perhaps even make a noticeable difference. But Mother Teresa has chosen instead to spread her franchise very thinly. To her the convent and the catechism matter more than the clinics. (near minute 28)

This was followed by a book and articles (Hitchens, 1995; 2003). Hitchens was also dismayed that Teresa and the Catholic Church continued to reject birth control – something that would have been fare more effective in reducing the number of abandoned babies that Teresa cared for. Despite Hitchens' comments, the Catholic Church rapidly advanced Mother Teresa to sainthood: she was beatified in 2003 and canonized in 2016.

Hitchens' critiques have been supported by others (Larivée et al, 2013; Bandyopadhyay, 2018). Perhaps the most significant defect in her mission in Calcutta was that she did not provide even the rudiments of modern medical care. Compassion is essential to medicine, but dying patients should not be denied the benefit of pharmacological pain relief. Mother Teresa also seemed to represent an obsolete approach to rectifying the ills of poverty. Some adjustment of the world's inequalities would be of far more benefit than simply treating the poor with compassion. Giving charity to those whom we exploit does not remove the stain of the exploitation.

The following illustration shows saint and critic:

Personal Epilogue

Jones (1960, p 123) quoted from a 1945 interview of T. S. Eliot by J. P. Hogan

> When, in an interview, Eliot was asked, ‘How would you, out of the bitter experience of the present time, wish mankind to develop?’ he answered:
> ‘I should speak of a greater spiritual consciousness, which is not asking that everybody should rise to the same conscious level, but that everybody should have some awareness of the depths of spiritual development and some appreciation and respect for those more exceptional people who can proceed further in spiritual knowledge than most of us can.’

I remember being quite taken by Celia when I first read the play as a young man. I had developed some modicum of spiritual consciousness and feelings similar to those reported by Celia

– an awareness of solitude and a sense of sin. I wondered whether I might meet someone like Sir Henry Harcout-Reilly who would show me what I should do with my life. I never saw a production of the play, and I never met anyone that might have been my Guardian. And although when I first read of Celia's death it seemed noble and right, I now feel it was foolish and mistaken.

References

Bandyopadhyay, R. (2018). Volunteer tourism and religion: the cult of Mother Teresa. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *70*, 133–136.

Camus, A. (1942). *Le mythe de Sisyphe*. Gallimard. English translation by J. O'Brien (1955). *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays.* Alfred A. Knopf.

Eliot, T. S. (1950). *The cocktail party: a comedy*. Faber & Faber.

Eliot, T. S. (1951). Poetry and drama. *Atlantic Monthly* (February 1951).

Hammerschmidt, H. (1981). The role of the "Guardians" in T.S. Eliot's Cocktail Party. *Modern Drama*, *24*(1), 54–66.

Hitchens, C. (1994). Mother Teresa: Hell's Angel. Channel 4 Television Program directed by Jenny Morgan, with text by Christoher Hitchens and Tariq Ali.

Hitchens, C. (1995). *The missionary position: Mother Teresa in theory and practice*. Verso.

Hitchens, C. (2003). Mommie dearest. The pope beatifies Mother Teresa, a fanatic, a fundamentalist, and a fraud. *Slate Magazine*. October 20, 2003.

Jones, D. E. (1960). *The plays of T.S. Eliot*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Larivée, S., Sénéchal, C., & Chénard, G. (2013). Les côtés ténébreux de Mère Teresa. *Studies in Religion*, *42*(3), 319–345.

Lesher, J. H. (2013). The self in conflict with itself: a Heraclitean theme in Eliot's *The Cocktail Party.* In Knippschild, S., & Garcıá Morcillo, M. (Eds.) *Seduction and power: antiquity in the visual and performing arts*. (pp 122-132). Bloomsbury Academic.

Llorens-Cubedo, D. (2022). The Cocktail Party and It's a Wonderful Life. *The T.S. Eliot Studies Annual*, *4*(1), 229–252.

Priestley, J. B. (1947). *An inspector calls: a play in three acts*. Heinemann.

Ranald, M. L., & Ranald, R. A. (1961). Shelley's Magus Zoroaster and the image of the Doppelgänger. *Modern Language Notes*, *76*(1), 7–12.

Rexine, J. E. (1965). Classical and Christian foundations of T. S. Eliot's Cocktail Party. *Books Abroad*, *39*(1), 21–26.

Sartre, J.-P. (1947). *Huis clos; suivi de Les mouches*. Gallimard.

Sartre, J.-P. (1946). *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*. Nagel.

Shelley, P. B. (1820). Prometheus unbound: a lyrical drama in four acts. C. & J. Ollier.

Smith, C. H. (1967). *T. S. Eliot's dramatic theory and practice: from Sweeney Agonistes to the Elder Statesman*. Princeton University Press.

Wu Wei: Effortless Action

One of the central ideas in the *Daodjing* of *Laozi* is the idea of *wu wei* (□□, simplified □□; *wúwéi*). This has been translated in many ways: "non-action," "actionlessness," "effortless action," and "doing nothing." The 37th chapter of the *Daodjing* considers *wu wei* an attribute of the eternal *Dao*. The 48th chapter promotes *wu wei* as a human virtue. The illustration shows *wu wei* in regular script (left) and in cursive (right).

Being True to Oneself

A foundational concept in Daoism is□□, *zìrán.* This word is composed of □ (self, oneself, from, since) and □ (right, correct, so, in this manner). Almost impossible to translate, the word has been variously rendered simply as "self-so" (Ziporyn, 2009) or more abstractly as "as-it-is-ness" (Fu, 1973, p 382). The meaning contains the idea of acting "naturally" or "spontaneously." An underlying concept is "authenticity" – one's action should be true to one's nature.

Laozi uses the word in the ending to Chapter 25 of the Daodejing (with translation by Wu, 2016):

> □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□
>
> Man follows the ways of Earth;
> Earth follows the ways of Heaven;
> Heaven follows the ways of *Dao*;
> *Dao* follows its own ways.

Several aspects of *zìrán* need consideration. First, the *Dao* acts through all things. As well as ordering the cosmos, the *Dao* acts through each individual object it contains. Human

beings must ultimately follow their own *zìrán.* Zhuang Zhou, commonly known as Zhuangzi (□□), a Daoist philosopher from the 4th Century BCE, begins his writings with a description of all the different things in the universe from the mythological great Peng bird to the morning mushroom, and recommends that one must act "on the rectitude (□, *zhèng*) of Heaven and Earth" (Lynn, 2022, p 8). Guo Xiang (□□, 265-312 CE) commented on this section of the *Zhuangzi*

> "Heaven and earth" is just a blanket term used to indicate all beings. It is all individual beings that form the very substance of heaven and earth, and it is each being's self-so [*ziran*] that aligns true to itself. "Self-so" [*ziran*] means what is so of itself [*ziran*], without being done by anyone or for any purpose. Thus, Peng's ability to fly high and the sparrow's ability to stay low, the great tree's ability to last long and the mushroom's ability to perish quickly, all these are done spontaneously, all are self-so [*ziran*] (Ziporyn, 2009, p 132.)

Second, the concept of *zìrán* does not mean that all things passively accept their lot in the universe. Misha Tadd (2019) argues that *zìrán* has as much to do with "authority" as with "authenticity." We need to be true to our ideal selves: to seek what we should be rather than accept what we are.

Third, the idea of acting "naturally" means acting in accord with the *Dao.* However, human beings do not need to return to the simple state of primitive societies to do so (Tadd, 2019, p 4). Although the idea of the "noble savage" was popular when the *Daodejing* was initially translated into Western languages, *Laozi* was not being nostalgic for a lost Eden; rather he was imagining a future utopia (Stamatov, 2023).

Yet Nothing is Left Undone

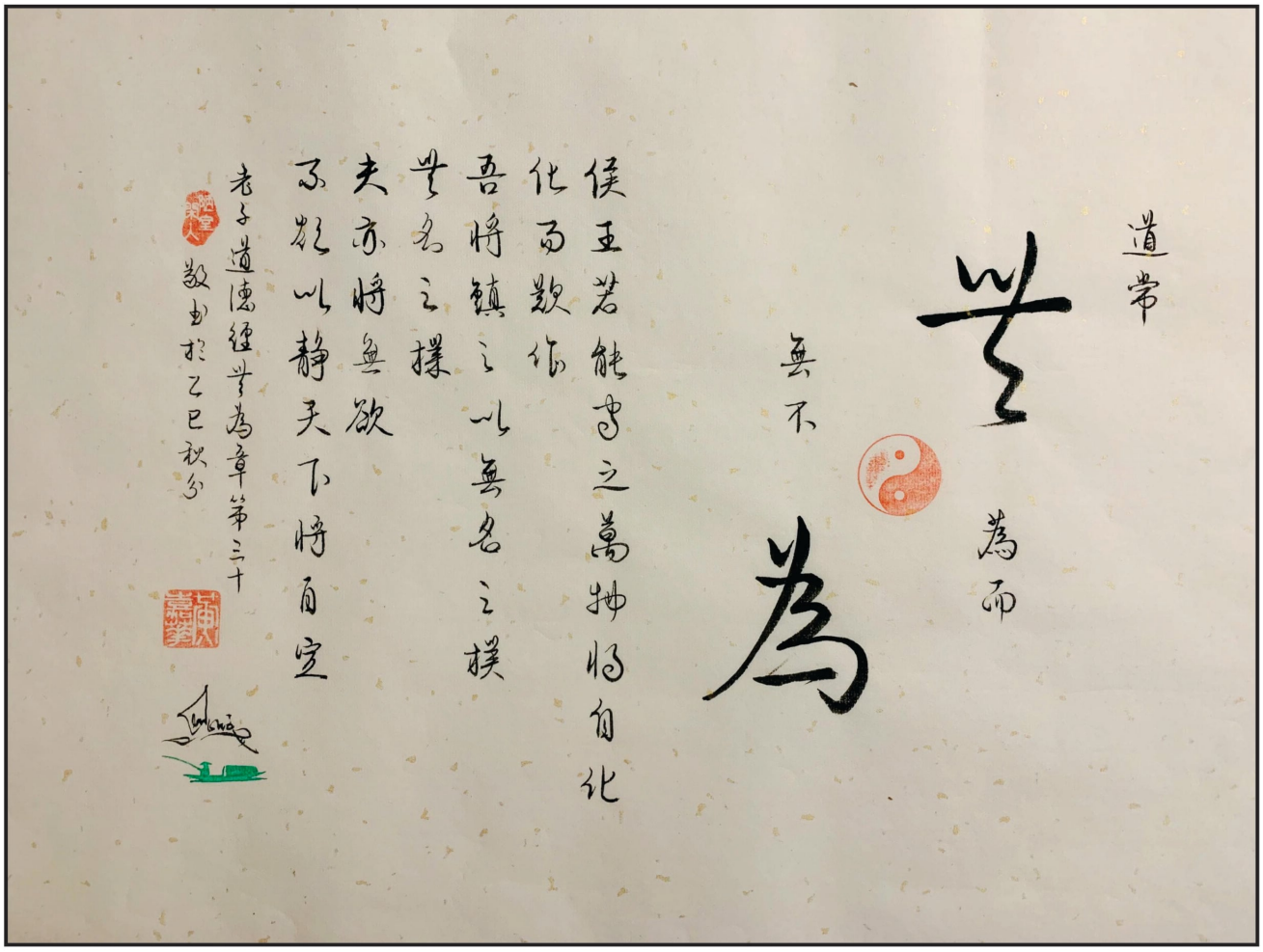
How the *Dao* “follows its own ways” is described in the 37th chapter of the *Daodejing*. This is the final chapter in the section of the book that deals with the nature of the *Dao*

The commonly accepted version of the *Daodejing* is divided into two parts. The first 37 chapters are concerned with the *Dao* (way), and the next 44 with the nature of *De* (virtue). Some recently discovered early versions reverse the ordering of the two parts (Chan, 2025). However, for our purposes it is appropriate to follow the traditional order and to understand the nature of the Dao before we propose a way for human virtue.

The last chapter pf the first part states that the eternal *Dao* – the principle that governs the universe – exercises its power by means of *wu wei*. The following is the Chinese text of Chapter 37 together with a translation by Wu (2016) and calligraphy by Ken Wong:

> 道恆無為而無不為。
> 侯王若能守之，萬物將自化。
> 化而欲作，
> 吾將鎮之以無名之樸。
> 無名之樸，夫亦將不欲。
> 不欲以靜，天下將自定。

> *Dao* in its eternity does nothing, yet nothing is not done.
> If lords and kings can all abide by that, all things will change of themselves.
> As they change, their desires start to grow;
> I calm them down with the nameless pristine timber.
> Calmed by the nameless pristine timber, they will have no more desire.
> Desireless and calm, the world will correct its own course.



The phrase □□□□ is usually translated as “nameless simplicity” (e.g., Fischer, 2023). The character □ (*pǔ*), another version of which is □, generally means “simple.” However, it once meant “unworked wood” – hence the “nameless pristine timber” of Wu’s translation.

The famous first line is shown below in a character-by-character translation:

道	恆	無(无)	為(为)	而	無(无)	不	為(为)
dào	*héng*	*wú*	*wèi*	*ér*	*wú*	*bù*	*wèi*
way path	eternal constant enduring	nothing	do act govern	and yet but	nothing	not	do act govern

The translation of *wu wei* (□□) is problematic. A simple translation is "doing nothing" but that is not *Laozi's* meaning. In Chapter 37 the *Dao* does nothing and yet somehow everything is done. The following are suggested translations of *wu wei*: "non-action" (Moeller, 2016), "effortless action" (Slingerland, 2003), "unself-conscious action" (Lynn, 2022, p 3), "non-contrivance" (Fischer, 2023, p 27), and "no purposive action" (Hansard, 2003).

Loy (1985) proposed that *wu wei* represent "nondual action:" the activity of an individual that has no self (with intentions and goals) but is rather part of a universal self. This can eliminate the problem of free will in a deterministic universe:

> whenever "I" act it is not "I" but the whole universe that "does" the action or rather is the action. If we accept that the universe is self-caused, then it acts freely whenever anything is done. Thus, from the nondualist perspective, complete determinism turns out to be equivalent to absolute freedom.

Slingerland (2003, p 7) comments

> It is important to realize, however, that *wu-wei* properly refers not to what is actually happening (or not happening) in the realm of observable action but rather to the state of mind of the actor. That is, it refers not to what is or is not being done but to the phenomenological state of the doer. … It describes a state of personal harmony in which actions flow freely and instantly from one's spontaneous inclinations—without the need for extended deliberation or inner struggle—and yet nonetheless accord perfectly with the dictates of the situation at hand, display an almost supernatural efficacy, and (in the Confucian context at least) harmonize with the demands of conventional morality.

Fischer (2023, p 27) describes the mental concomitant of *wu*

wei:

> It describes the state of acting genuinely, unselfconsciously, or, as we might say, “from the heart,” as opposed to doing something self-consciously, because others expect you to, or because you are coerced.

Decreasing Day by Day

In the 48th chapter of the *Daodejing Laozi* proposes *wu wei* as the ideal of human behavior. The following is the Chinese text together with a translation by Wu (2016):

> 為學日益，為道日損。
> 損之又損，以至於無為。
> 無為而無不為。
> 取天下常以無事，
> 及其有事，不足以取天下。

> To pursue learning you increase day by day; to pursue *Dao* you decrease day by day.
> Decrease and yet again decrease, till you reach the state of Non-doing.
> Do nothing and yet nothing is not done.
> The world is often won without busying around;
> When busying around occurs, the world cannot be won.

The third line repeats the first line of Chapter 37 as an injunction for human behavior. We must follow the same principle as the *Dao*. Although it is easy to say that the Dao can act according to its own self, how exactly human beings can do so is clear. The chapter states that the world can only be won without 事 (*shì,* business/work/responsibility).

The *Zhuangzi* provides several examples of acting in accord with *wu wei*, the most famous example being butcher Ding. The story is introduced with the comments:

The flow of my life is always channeled by its own boundaries, but the mind bent on knowledge never is. A flow channeled by its own boundaries is endangered when forced to follow something that is not, and trying to rescue it with the doings of the knowing mind only makes the danger worse. (Ziporyn, 2009, p 21).

King Hui of Liang was very impressed with the skill of his butcher Ding who was able to cut up an ox with remarkable speed and agility. When asked how he had become so adept, Ding replied:

> What I love is the Course [*Dao*], something that advances beyond mere skill. When I first started cutting up oxen, all I looked at for three years was oxen, and yet still I was unable to see all there was to see in an ox. But now I encounter it with the spirit rather than scrutinizing it with the eyes. My understanding consciousness, beholden to its specific purposes, comes to a halt, and thus the promptings of the spirit begin to flow. I depend on Heaven's unwrought perforations and strike the larger gaps, following along with the broader hollows. I go by how they already are, playing them as they lay. So my knife has never had to cut through the knotted nodes where the warp hits the weave, much less the gnarled joints of bone. A good cook changes his blade once a year: he slices. An ordinary cook changes his blade once a month: he hacks. I have been using this same blade for nineteen years, cutting up thousands of oxen, and yet it is still as sharp as the day it came off the whetstone. For the joints have spaces within them, and the very edge of the blade has no thickness at all. When what has no thickness enters into an empty space, it is vast and open, with more than enough room for the play of the blade. That is why my knife is still as sharp as if it had just come off the whetstone, even after nineteen years. (Ziporyn, 2009, p 22).

One might simply understand that through years of study and

practice the cook had become so proficient at his that eveything was performed by learned reflex, without any need for consciousness. However, consicuousness still played a role: the cook continued:

> Nonetheless, whenever I come to a clustered tangle, realizing that it is difficult to do anything about it, I instead restrain myself as if terrified, until my seeing comes to a complete halt. My activity slows, and the blade moves ever so slightly. Then all at once, I find the ox already dismembered at my feet like clumps of soil scattered on the ground. I retract the blade and stand there gazing at my work arrayed all around me, dawdling over it with satisfaction. Then I wipe off the blade and put it away. (Ziporyn, 2009, p 22)

After long thought and much practice we can become adept at anything. We behave automatically. However, consciousness still plays a role, slowing us down when problems arise, preventing mistakes that occur when one becomes more convinced of one's skill than warranted.

The Art of Rulership

Laozi considers how leaders can best govern their people in Chapter 17 of the *Daodjing*. The following is the Chinese text and the translation of Wu (2009):

> 太上，不知有之；其次，亲而誉之；
>
> 其次，畏之；其次，侮之。
>
> 信不足焉，有不信焉。
>
> 悠兮其贵言。功成事遂，百姓皆谓：我自然。

> The best ruler is one whose presence is unknown;
> the second best is one who is beloved and praised;
> the next best is one who is feared;
> the next is one who is despised.

> Where there is insufficient good faith,
> there is loss of faith.
>
> Relax and spare your words.
> When the goal is achieved and the job is done,
> everyone says, “We did it.”

Laozi favors the ruler who exercises *wu wei,* who allows his ministers to exercise their responsibilities, and who lets his people to be true to their own selves: □□, *ziran*. Another translation of the final line is: The people all say: “We have done it by ourselves.” (Lin, 1977)

These ideas on government were extensively discussed in the *Huainanzi*, a collection of writings collected to assist the Prince of Huainan in the 2nd Century BCE (Ames,1981). The following is from one of the essays entitled *The Art of Rulership*:

> Thus, the ruler in possession of the Way extinguishes thought and dispenses with guessing, and waiting in limpidity and vacuity, he uses words that do not boast and takes action that does not rob subordinates of responsibility. He makes demands of fulfilment according to claims made. He lets them get on with their duties without telling them how; he expects them to fulfil their duties without instructing them. He takes not knowing as his Way and being at a loss as to what to do as his treasure. Acting in this way, each of the various officials has his appointed tasks. (Ames, 1981, p 202)

The Concept of Flow

Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi (1934-2021), a Hungarian-American psychologist, became interested in why people can become so completely involved in difficult, time-consuming and sometimes dangerous activities, that they lose all sense of self and time. He described the experience as one of “flow”

(Csíkszentmihályi, 1990). Nakamura and Csíkszentmihályi (in Csíkszentmihályi, 2014, p 240) describe the following subjective characteristics of being “in flow:”

1. Intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment
2. Merging of action and awarenessLoss of reflective self-consciousness (i.e., loss of awareness of oneself as a social actor)
3. A sense that one can control one’s actions; that is, a sense that one can in principle deal with the situation because one knows how to respond to whatever happens next
4. Distortion of temporal experience (typically, a sense that time has passed faster than normal)
5. Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding, such that often the end goal is just an excuse for the process.

Athletes during peak performance, musicians during virtuoso recitals, and scientists formulating a new theory all experience this state of flow. Other terms that have been used to describe it are “in the zone” or “being locked in.” The individual in the flow is fully conscious of what is going on, but there is little if any self-consciousness. The game is being played, the music is being made, the theory is being grasped.

This state can only come after one has become an expert. Only when the actions can occur automatically, can consciousness move to a higher level – directing the strategy of the game rather than making individual movements, conveying the meaning rather than playing the notes, finding the underlying pattern rather than simply recording what is happening.

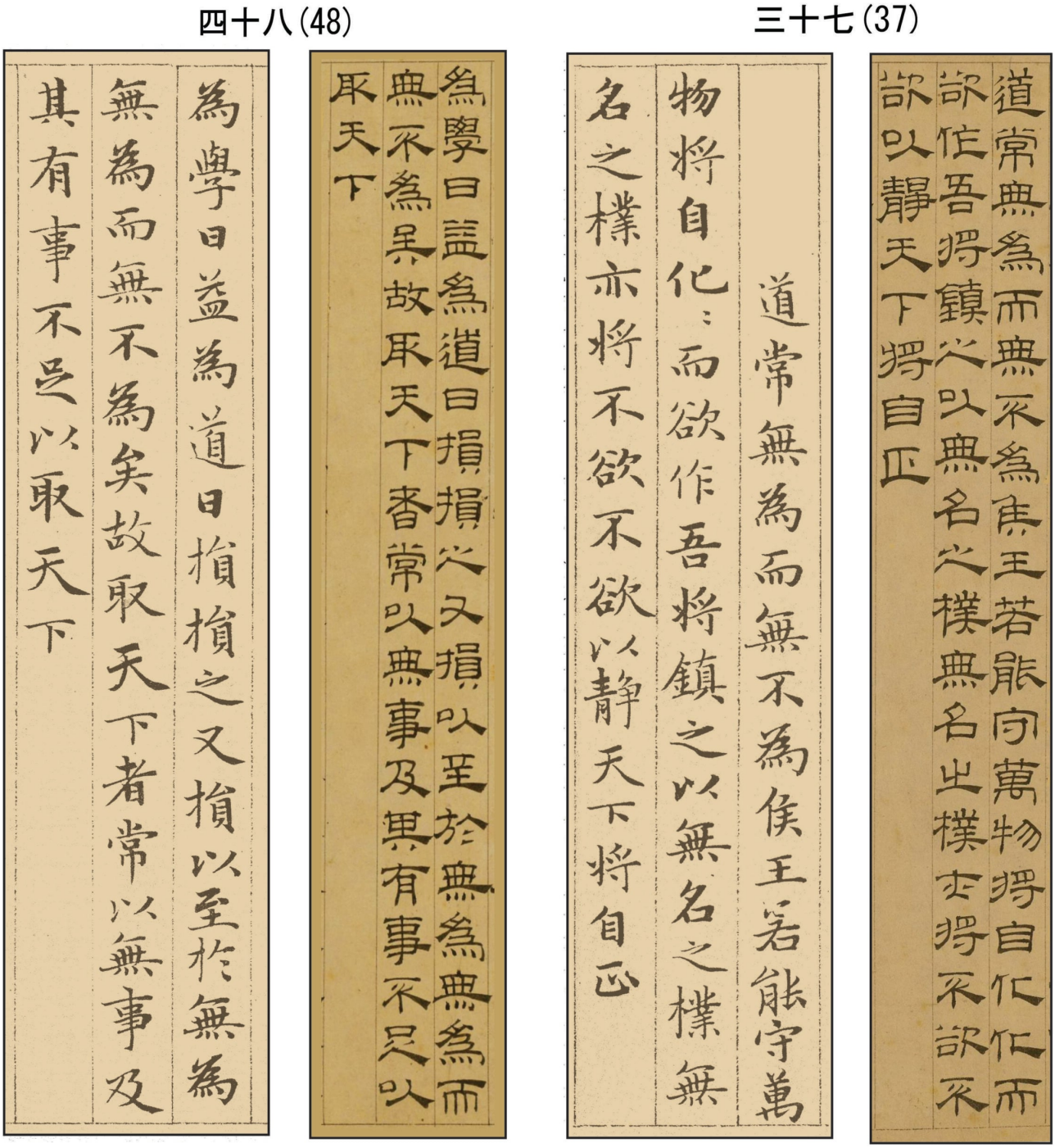
A person in a state of flow is very similar to a person acting according to the principle of *wu wei* (De Pryker, 2011). Both are acting effortlessly and without self-consciousness. In

both action and awareness are fused. There are differences – flow empowers the individual self, whereas *wu wei* leads to a decrease in personal desires as one seeks greater union with the universal self. Nevertheless, the two states are far more similar than different.

In recent years, the concepts of *wu wei* have been used to promote higher achievements in sports (Kee et al. 2021) and to find happiness in normal human behavior through "effortless living" (Gregory, 2018). A major difficulty is in deciding how to attain *wu wei.* One must become highly skilled and then become so completely involved in something that one loses oneself in the endeavor. One can try to be "mindful," to live in the present, to eliminate personal desires, but such advice is imprecise.

The Flow of Calligraphy

Chapters 37 and 48 of the *Daodejing* – the chapters that are crucial to the concept of *wu wei* are shown below in the calligraphy of the 13th Century Zhao Mengfu in regular script, and of the 14th Century Sheng Mao in clerical script):



The esthetics of Chinese calligraphy depends on the flow from one character to another. The true calligrapher follows the principle of *wu wei* and writes effortlessly. Chiang Yee (1973, p 117) describes the essential characteristics of Chinese calligraphy:

> The beauty of Chinese calligraphy is essentially the beauty of plastic movement, not of designed and motionless shape. A finished piece of it is not a symmetrical arrangement of

> conventional shapes, but something like the co-ordinated movements of a skilfully composed dance –impulse, momentum, momentary poise, and the interplay of active forces combining to form a balanced whole.

Envoi

We can conclude with some comments of the poet and Trappist monk Thomas Merton in his introduction to his free translations from the *Zhuangzi* (2004, p 21):

> The true character of wu wei is not mere inactivity but perfect action–because it is act without activity. In other words, it is action not carried out independently of Heaven and earth and in conflict with the dynamism of the whole, but in perfect harmony with the whole. It is not mere passivity, but it is action that seems both effortless and spontaneous because performed "rightly," in perfect accordance with our nature and with our place in the scheme of things. It is completely free because there is in it no force and no violence. It is not "conditioned" or "limited" by our own individual needs and desires, or even by our own theories and ideas.

And an excerpt from his translation (p. 69):

> If man, born in Tao,
> Sinks into the deep shadow
> Of non-action
> To forget aggression and concern,
> He lacks nothing
> His life is secure.

References

Ames, R. T. (1981) Wu-wei in "The art of rulership" chapter of

Huai Nan Tzu: its sources and philosophical orientation. *Philosophy East and West*, 31(2), 193-213

Chan, A. K. L. (2025). Laozi. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.*

Chiang, Y. (1973). *Chinese calligraphy: an introduction to its aesthetic and technique* (3rd ed.). Harvard University Press.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience*. Harper & Row.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014). *Flow and the foundations of positive psychology*. Springer Netherlands.

De Prycker, V. (2011). Unself-conscious control: broadening the notion of control through experiences of flow and wu-wei. *Zygon*, *46*(1), 5–25.

Fischer, P. (2023). *The annotated Laozi: a new translation of the Daodejing*. State University of New York at Albany.

Fu, C. W.-H. (1973). Lao Tzu's conception of Tao. *Inquiry (Oslo)*, *16*(1–4), 367–394.

Gregory, J. (2018). *Effortless living: wu-wei and the spontaneous state of natural harmony.* Inner Traditions.

Hansen (2003). Wuwei: taking no action. In Cua, A. S. (Ed.) *Encyclopedia of Chinese philosophy*. (pp 784-786). Routledge.

Kee, Y. H., Li, C., Zhang, C.-Q., & Wang, J. C. K. (2021). The wu-wei alternative: Effortless action and non-striving in the context of mindfulness practice and performance in sport. *Asian Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, *1*(2–3), 122–132.

Lin, P. J. (1977, open access 2020). *A Translation of Lao-tzu's Tao Te Ching and Wang Pi's Commentary*. (Volume 30 in University of Michigan Chinese Studies). University of

Michigan.

Liu, X. (2015). Laozi’s philosophy: textual and conceptual analyses. In X. Liu (Ed.), *Dao Companion to Daoist Philosophy* (pp. 71–100). Springer Netherlands.

Loy, D. (1985). Wei-Wu-Wei: nondual action. *Philosophy East & West*, *35*(1), 73–86.

Lynn, R. J. (2022). *Zhuangzi: a new translation of the sayings of Master Zhuang as interpreted* Columbia University Press.

Merton, T. (2004). *The way of Chuang Tzu*. Shambhala.

Moeller, H. G. (2015). Basic aspects of daoist philosophy. *International Communication of Chinese Culture, 2* (2), 99–107.

Slingerland, E. G. (2003). *Effortless action: Wu-wei as conceptual metaphor and spiritual ideal in early China*. Oxford University Press.

Stamatov, A. (2023). The Laozi’s ideal state: nostalgia, utopia, state of nature. *Religions, 14*(10), 1243.

Tadd, M. (2019). *Ziran*: authenticity or authority? *Religions*, *10*(3), 207.

Wu, C. Q. (2016). *Thus spoke Laozi: a new translation with commentaries of Daodejing.* University of Hawaii*.*

Ziporyn, B. (2009). *Zhuangzi: the essential writings with selections from traditional commentaries*. Hackett

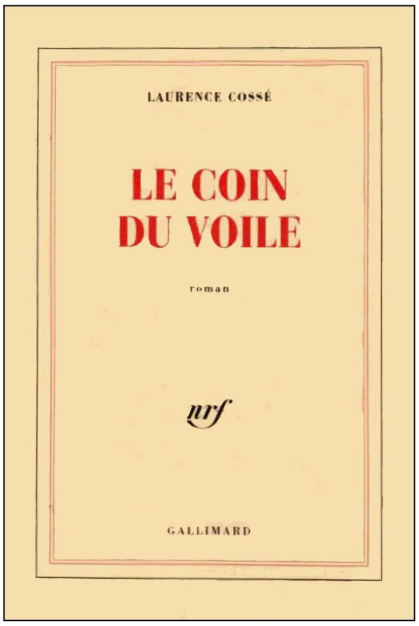
Laurence Cossé: Le Coin du Voile

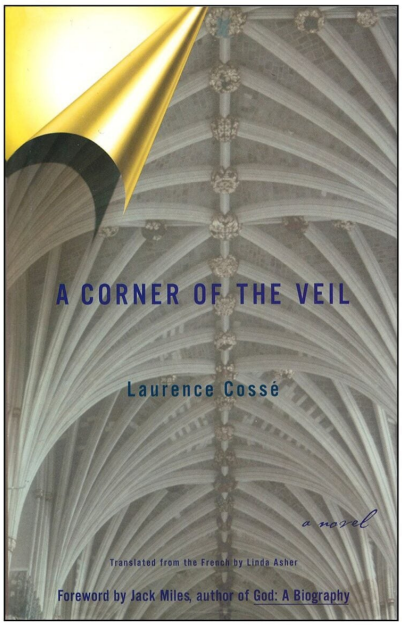
Laurence Cossé's 1996 novel *Le coin du voile* (A corner of the veil) describes the effects of a new and irrefutable proof for the existence of God. A priest who had resigned his calling to spend months in prayer and abstinence submits the proof for publication in *Outlooks*, the lay journal of the French Casuists. All those who read it are completely convinced. On seeing its effects, the Provincial of the Casuists decides to keep the proof secret until its effects can be more clearly understood. Finally, the Secretary of State at the Vatican arranges for all those who had read the proof to retire from any contact with the public and for the proof to be kept hidden. The proof becomes a pontifical secret – "a piece of information the Holy Father must not learn under any circumstance."

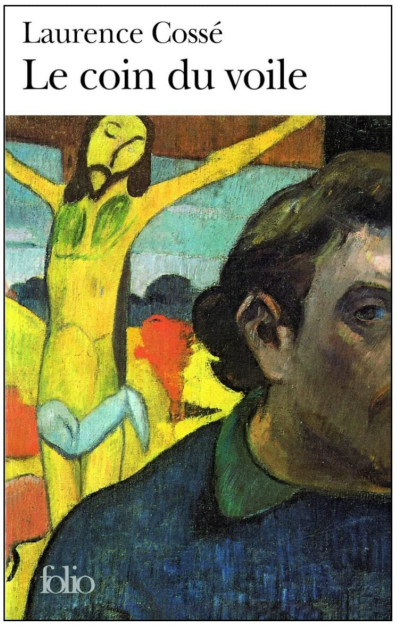
The novel, published by Gallimard in 1996, received generally positive reviews, and won several French literary prizes. Readers were charmed by the story but had some difficulty deciding on its basic nature: was it a philosophical fable, a religious thriller, a gentle satire, or an outright farce? The book touches lightly on serious matters: Burns. (1999) called it "casually profound" and Dumort (1997) considered it an "un opéra-bouffe sans la musique." Cobb (2005, p 156) complimented the author for her "insightful reflections on the moral springs that move real human beings." Some critics would have preferred more depth (Eder, 1999; McInerny, 1999), but this seems akin to wishing that Voltaire wrote like Diderot.

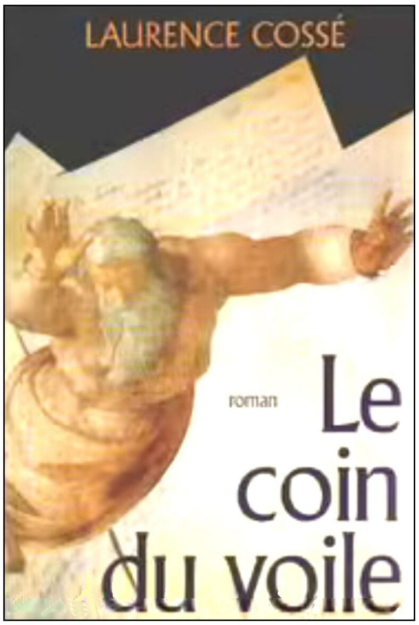
The book has been translated into English (A Corner of the Veil), German (*Der Beweis*, The Proof), Italian (*La sesta prova,* The Sixth Proof; *La prova nascosta*, The hidden proof) and Spanish (*La punta del velo*). The following illustration shows some of the covers. The French paperbacks use details

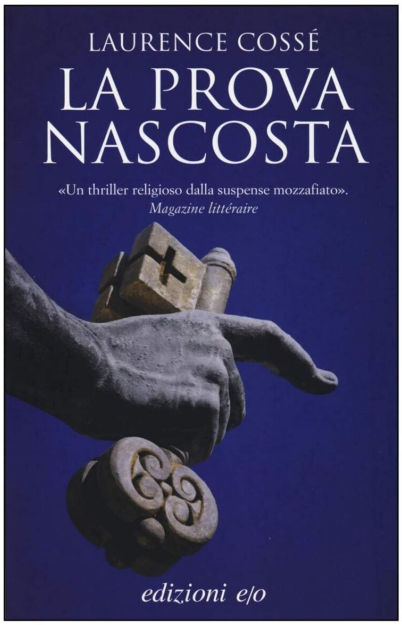
from paintings by Paul Gauguin (*Self Portrait with the Yellow Christ*, 1891) and Michelangelo (*Separation of the Earth from the Waters*, Sistine Chapel, 1512). The cover of the English translation shows the ceiling of a gothic cathedral (Exeter) with a corner being pulled back to reveal the radiance of heaven.

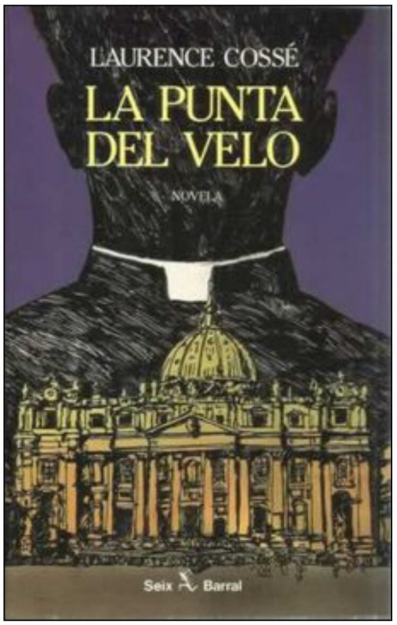












The Casuists

The Novel begins one evening with Father Bertrand Beaulieu, editor of the Casuist journal *Regards* (translated as *Outlooks*

by Linda Asher), going through his correspondence. The Casuists are clearly the Jesuits, and the journal is clearly the publication Études, established in 1856 by the French Jesuits.

The Society of Jesus was founded in Paris in 1534 by the Spanish nobleman Ignatius of Loyola and six fellow students at the University of Paris. The largest of the Catholic religious orders, it is widely involved in education, missionary work, and humanitarian activities.

Soon after the order was established, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) revised the Catholic Church's position on the Sacrament of Penance and the process of confession. Sinners were no longer able to purchase indulgences to escape the consequences of their sins. Instead, priests listened to sinners' confessions, assessed their remorse, provided absolution, and outlined appropriate acts of penance to make amends. This led to a need for more sophisticated moral reasoning, since many human acts cannot easily be judged according to the commandments available in the scriptures. Several Jesuits contributed extensively to the new moral philosophy, most especially Antonio Escobar y Mendoza (1589–1669) who treatise *Summula casuum conscientiae* (1627) outlined how moral judgments could be made on a case-by-case basis by applying knowledge of the law, ethics, and scripture. This approach came to be known as casuistry, and the *Summula* became the confessor's handbook.

Unfortunately, some of the casuist proposals, most particularly concerning the differentiation between intentions and acts, could easily lead to moral laxity. Sinners could be excused for the bad consequences of their acts because their intentions had been good. Escobar was a strict adherent to the Jesuit rules of poverty, chastity and obedience, but sinners found it easy to abuse his moral reasoning. Thus it was said that Escobar "purchased heaven dearly for himself, but gave it away cheap to others." Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) took Escobar

to task in his Lettres Provinciales. For example, he pointed out that the casuist could reason that although it is wrong to kill someone because of hatred, one could do so blamelessly if one professed fear for one's own safety. Escobar's logic was no match for Pascal's wit. "Casuistry" soon came to mean the use of clever but unsound reasoning to excuse moral culpability; indeed, "Jesuitical" took on the same connotation The following illustration shows Escobar on the left and Pascal on the right:

Nowadays, however, casuistry has returned to favor as a way to approach complex moral decisions (Jonson, 2005).

Six Pages in a Brown Envelope

In his pile of correspondence, Father Beaulieu recognizes the crazy writing on a cheap brown envelope. The sender had written to him multiple times before, each time with a different proof for the existence of God, each time failing to

convince anyone. Beaulieu puts the envelope at the bottom of the pile, but later that evening finally opens it, and dutifully reads the contents:

> Dix heures vingt-cinq. Enfin. Il ne restait plus que la lettre brune. Beaulieu l'ouvrit, exaspéré d'avance. Mon Dieu, le nombre de cinglés que Vous mettez au monde. L'écriture était effrayante, une espèce de broderie ne laissant pas la moindre marge à droite ni à gauche, pas plus qu'en haut ni en bas. Il n'y avait que six feuillets, ce soir, moins que les autres fois. Beaulieu prit un carré de chocolat dans le tiroir de son bureau et commença à lire.
> Six pages plus loin, il tremblait. Cette fois la preuve n'était ni arithmétique, ni physique, ni esthétique, ni astronomique, elle était irréfutable. La preuve de l'existence de Dieu était faite.
>
> [Ten twenty-five. Finally. Only the brown letter left to go. Beaulieu opened it, already exasperated. Dear God, the number of madmen You put into the world. The handwriting was dreadful, a kind of embroidery that left no margin right or left, top or bottom. There were only six sheets tonight, fewer than the other times. Beaulieu took a square of chocolate from the desk drawer and started reading.
> Six pages farther, he was trembling. This time the proof was neither arithmetical, nor physical, nor esthetical, nor astronomical; it was irrefutable. The proof of God's existence had been achieved. (p 15)]

Beaulieu is overwhelmed. He prostrates himself on the floor as he did on the day of his ordination. After an hour he rises and visits his friend Hervé Montgaroult, a Jesuit professor whose specialty is cataphatic ontology. "Cataphatic" (from Greek *cata* an intensifier and *phanai* speak) deals with the affirmative description of the divine (e.g., God is love) as opposed to "anaphatic" (*apo* other) which uses negative descriptions (e.g., God is unknowable).

Proof for the Existence of God

When Beaulieu presents the professor with the proof, Montgaroult protests that “No proof of the existence of God has ever held up,” and begins to review all the historical proofs. Beaulieu finally stops him, and leaves his with the six handwritten pages, insisting that he just read.

The most famous of the historical proofs for the existence of God are the Five Ways of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), an Italian Dominican who taught at the University of Paris (Pasnau, 2024). These five proofs are included in both his Summa Theologica and in his Summa contra Gentiles.

Aquinas’ first proof, which argues for God as the “prime mover,” derives from Aristotle. Things are in motion; whatever is in motion must have been put into motion by something else, which itself must have been moved by something else, and so on. Since this chain of events cannot go on forever, there must be a prime mover that can move things without being moved. This must be God.

Aquinas therefore contradicted the claims of Ibn Rushd (1126-1198, also known as Averroes), a Muslim commentator on Aristotle, who argued that the chain of events does go on forever, and that God created a world that is eternal (Ben Ahmed & Pasnau, 2025; Dales, 1990, p 45). In 1484 painting by Benozzo Gozzoli, *The Triumph of Thomas Aquinas*, now in the Louvre, celebrates Aquinas’ victory over Averroes:

The painting derives its iconography from an earlier work probably painted in about 1330 by Lippo Memmi (Polzer, 1993) to celebrate the canonization of Thomas Aquinas in 1323.

The upper section of the painting shows God blessing those that have revealed the truth: the Apostle Paul with the sword, Moses with the tablets and the four Evangelists who wrote the gospels, each with their symbolic creature (angel, lion, ox, eagle). Gods states:

> *Bene scripsisti de me, Thomma* [You have written well about

me, Thomas].

In the center of the painting Thomas Aquinas, flanked by Aristotle and Plato, holds his *Summa contra Gentile,* which begins with an epigraph from Proverbs 8:7:

> *Veritatem meditabitur guttur meum et labia mea de testabuntur impium*. [For my mouth shall speak truth; and wickedness is an abomination to my lips]

The first words of the Summa are

> *Multitudinis usus, quem in rebus nominandis sequendum philosophus censet, com muniter" obtinuit, ut sapientes dicantur qui res directe ordinant et eas bene gubernant* [The usage of the multitude, which, according to the Philosopher (Aristotle) is to be followed in giving names to things, has commonly held that they are to be called wise who order things rightly and govern them well.]

The books below the central book show quotations from the *Summa Theologica* (see Polzer, 1993, p 43, for details).

Below Aquinas lies the vanquished Averroes. His book states:

> *Et faciens causas infinitas in primum librum Aristotelis physicorum* [And making infinite causes in the first book of Aristotle's Physics]

Below him is written

> *Vere hic est lumen ecclesie* [Truly this is the light of the church]

And below this, Pope Pius II and his clergy teach the revelations of Aquinas to the assembled believers.

Aquinas is right and Averroes is wrong. Not because of logic, but because Aquinas' conclusions fit with the teachings of the Church.

The other four proofs of Aquinas are:

> Causality: God is the first cause that prevents an infinite chain of cause and effect.
>
> Contingency: God is the necessary being from which all other derive
>
> Degree: God is the criterion by which one can determine what is good, beautiful and true.
>
> Teleology: God is the ultimate end to which the universe is progressing.

Another famous proof for God, which Aquinas disputed, is the Ontological Proof of Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109). Since everyone can conceive of a being than which no greater can be thought, such a being must exist since existence is necessary to greatness.

Many other logical proofs for the existence of God have been proposed (Restivo, 2021, pp. 99-112). In a recent novel, Rebecca Goldstein (2010) considered 36 different arguments for the existence of God.

However, it is doubtful that anyone has ever been convinced to believe in God because of logical argument. Rather such proofs are a put together subsequent to belief:

> A proof of God's existence ought really to be something by means of which one could convince oneself that God exists. But I think that what *believers* who have furnished such proofs have wanted to do is give their "belief" an intellectual analysis and foundation, although they themselves would never have come to believe as a result of such proofs. (Wittgenstein, 1980, 85e)

Nevertheless, after Beaulieu leaves, the skeptical Montgaroult reads the six pages, and is instantly convinced. He spends the night wandering around the streets of Paris in a mystical

daze. He is particularly happy about how the new proof solves the age-old problem of evil.

> God was no longer mysterious. Evil was no longer a mystery. God was no longer either heart-breaking or heartbroken, and the question that for centuries had woken men in the night would no longer arise, the hideous question of whether He had or had not a role in evil. (p 29)

Religious Qualms

The next morning, Beaulieu and Montgaroult meet with Hubert Le Dangeolet, the Provincial of the Casuists in France. He is skeptical. His first impression is that his two visitors have lost their minds. He decides not to read the proof, and locks it up in his safe. He arranges for two other Casuists, internationally known theological experts, one from Belgium and one from Switzerland, to come to Paris the next day to assess the proof.

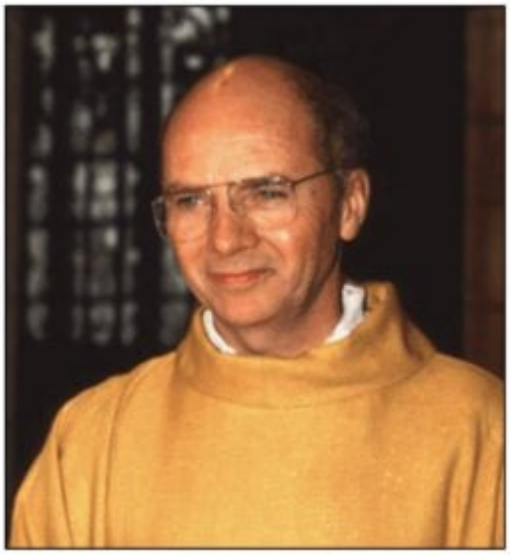
Beaulieu visits Martin Mauduit, the author of the proof. The name "Mauduit" is not far removed from *maudit* (cursed or damned). Once a priest, Martin had resigned his vocation because he felt that he could discover a new understanding of God through thought. He realized that his first attempts at new proofs for the existence of God, which he had submitted to the journal *Outlooks*, were abject failures. But then, after weeks of prayer and abstinence, he had woken one morning to find on his floor a six-page proof that he had no memory of writing. The proof had not been reasoned out; it had simply been revealed.

Mauduit is described as

> A small man in his sixties, frail and bald. His smile and his eyes, the assurance and joy in these features alone, recalled someone—Bertrand remembered whom almost instantly:

> Bishop Gaillot. The churchman about whom every French person, even his warmest supporters, had wondered in 1995 whether he was Saint Francis of Assisi or Narcissus. (pp 60-61)

Bishop Jacques Gaillot (1935-2023) was Bishop of Évreux from 1982 to 1995, at which time he was removed from his position by Pope John Paul II because of his unorthodox and outspoken positions on abortion, immigration, homosexuality, and Palestine. He came to be known as the 'Red Cleric.'



The next day, the two experts come to Paris, read the proof, are completely convinced, and weep tears of joy. Le Dangeolet realizes that the proof is real but still remains cautious.

> I've got to keep a cool head and a free mind. The people who have read the proof are immediately possessed by it. They no longer have the slightest objectivity. I've seen four of our colleagues topple over, one after the other. We can't have our whole Casuist province in France slipping into a way of life that is positively Franciscan, and the *ecstatic* branch at that. (p 112)

He contacts Waldemar Waldenhag, the Father General of the Jesuit Order.

Political Upheavals

Secrets are hard to keep. Before long the government becomes aware that the Casuists possess a new proof for the existence of God. The Prime Minister of France, Jean-Charles Petitgrand, pays a clandestine visit to Le Dangeolet. He is shown the proof. He does not read it, but is completely convinced of its veracity simply by being in its presence. He decides to change his life. He retires from politics:

> For the ten or fifteen years he had left to live, he would praise the Eternal One, simply, through love for his roses, for his wife, and for his fellow man. (p 107)

He issues a press release describing his resignation as due to "a sudden irruption of meaning into my life" (p 261). An advisor summarizes for the cabinet ministers what the future might hold:

> Within six months, within a year, we have to imagine France as one huge monastery. Everything that today is the motivating force of the advanced liberal societies—the spirit of enterprise, the quest for wealth, the concern for efficiency, the work ethic . . . briefly, what others might call the every-man-for-himself, the activism, the copycat greed, money as guiding light—at the announcement of the proof that God exists, all of that will no longer seem important to our fellow citizens. God becomes a certainty in our midst. How do we react? We spend all our time on Him. We just about cease to work. We earn much less money, but what does it matter? We no longer yearn to change apartments, go off on vacation, send our children to American business schools. We no longer chase after money. If we do work, it's just enough for what we need to eat and be clothed, to have a roof over our heads. Most of our time we spend meditating, praying. We study Scripture. We succor the poor, we comfort

> the lonely. We gaze on nature. We feel we're opening our eyes for the first time. We breathe. (pp 146-147)

The ministers are aghast; the reader is amused. However, this description of a society concerned only with God is not an exaggeration. It must give us pause. Whatever our religious beliefs, do we really wish to put an end to human striving?

Other problems are also considered. The proof was given to the Christians, and apparently the God whose existence is now verified is the Christian God. What will those who profess belief in other Gods think of this?

The politicians confer with Le Dangeolet. A decision is made to keep the new proof secret until the Church and the State can assess its possible effects.

A Visit to Rome

Le Dangeolet, Mauduit, and the four casuists who have read the proof travel to Rome to meet with Father General Waldemar Waldenhag. He is cautious about the proof.

> Doubt about the existence of God was the only formula viable for mankind. People who wanted to believe could believe; those who preferred not to didn't have to. No greater certainty for the one than for the other. A mutual respect—except for the periods of certainty. Certainty, on whichever side, breeds fanaticism. That's not all it breeds, but it never fails to breed that. Look at the Crusaders, the Inquisitors, as well as the atheist revolutionaries: all of them slashed and burned and guillotined, completely confident they were doing the right thing. In the end, doubt is the only counterweight to human madness. It's reason, that's what doubt is. (pp 232-233)

Nevertheless, Waldenhag ultimately decides to read the six

pages. He really wishes to know if the proof might solve the age-old problem of evil. How does a priest explain to someone subject to undeserved suffering how an omnipotent and benevolent God has allowed this to happen?

> I want to know why, how, and in the name of what superior plan the good and all-powerful God of the Gospel lets nations tear each other's guts out, lets the earth crack open in the middle of cities, and lets children die of hunger. I've 'explained' it a thousand times, using those enormously sophisticated arguments inherited from Thomism that you know as well as I do, and I've done it with such assurance that I must have convinced people sometimes. But for me, the mystery of evil sticks in my craw. (p 237)

And after reading the pages he is as convinced as the others. The problem of evil in the universe appears to be explained

The Problem of Evil

When we consider the arguments for and against the existence of God, the problem of evil (and the suffering that it causes) is generally the atheist's most effective argument (Mackie, 1982; van Inwagen, 2006; Speak, 2014; Perrine, 2025). If God is omniscient, he cannot be unaware of our suffering; if He is omnipotent, he must be able to intervene in the world; if He is omnibenevolent, he should act to prevent our suffering. If we accept these characteristics of God, the very fact that there is suffering in our world is incompatible with His existence. If he truly were omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent, there would be no suffering.

In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), David Hume described the problem of evil by referring back to ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BCE)

> Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both

> able and willing? whence then is evil? (Hume, 1779, part X)

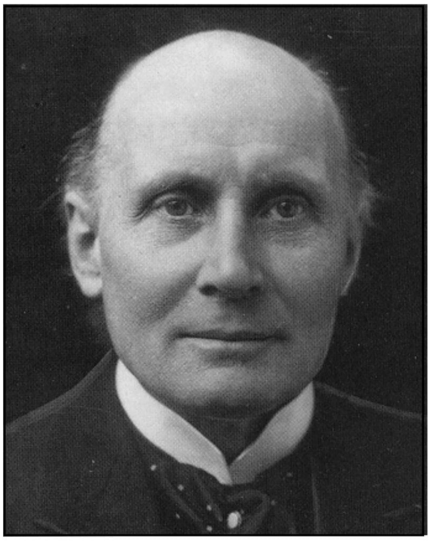
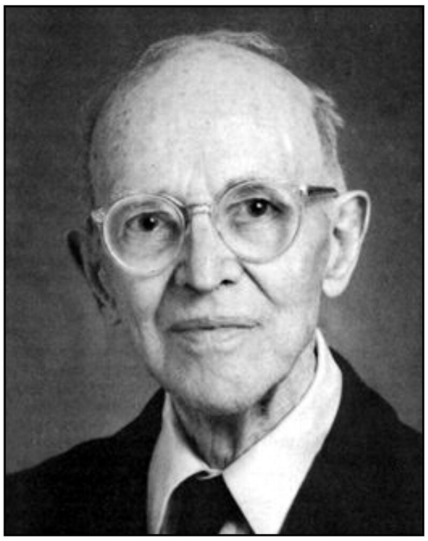
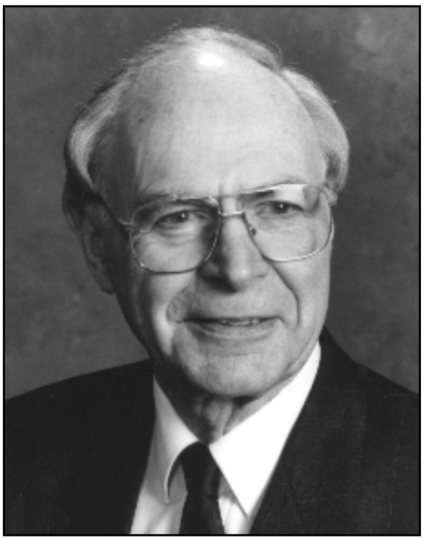
Over the years theists have proposed many different arguments for the existence of evil. These justifications (or exonerations) of God go by the name of “theodicies.” None of these are convincing (Picton, 2013, pp 361-364). Ultimately, one is left with the idea that God operates at levels beyond human comprehension. We are not able to see the grand scheme of things. Nevertheless, He has assured us through scripture that he knows what is best, and that he will take care of us.

Panentheism

The next morning Waldenhag tells Le Dangeolet some snippets of what was in the six pages proving the existence of God. This is the only time in the book that the reader is given any idea of what is in the proof:

> With the world God created totality of being.
>
> Everything that is has no other meaning but being.
>
> Through the Creation, God explores in Himself the free play of being, of all being: good, evil, sense and nonsense, splendor and horror mixed.
>
> What is, is nothing else but God in the process of being.
>
> We are grounded in God, each person for what he is.

These principles are closely related to the process theology of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) and to the panentheism of Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000) and Arthur Peacocke (1924-2006) – illustrated from left to right in the following figure.

The main idea of process theology is that God is the universe becoming itself. This occurs through an outpouring of God's love and goodness into the world. Since the process is intelligible rather than mysterious, science becomes the study of God in all his manifestations. Process theology also provides a way of reconciling the existence of God with the presence of suffering in the world. God and the universe are in the process of becoming. Evil and suffering are present to the extent that this process is as yet incomplete. The following quotation is from Whitehead's *Process and Reality* (1929, p 532):

> There are thus four creative phases in which the universe accomplishes its actuality. There is first the phase of conceptual origination, deficient in actuality, but infinite in its adjustment of valuation. Secondly, there is the temporal phase of physical origination, with its multiplicity of actualities. In this phase full actuality is attained; but there is deficiency in the solidarity of individuals with each other. This phase derives its determinate conditions from the first phase. Thirdly, there is the phase of perfected actuality, in which the many are one everlastingly, without the qualification of any loss either of individual identity or of completeness of unity. In everlastingness, immediacy is reconciled with objective

> immortality. This phase derives the conditions of its being from the two antecedent phases. In the fourth phase, the creative action completes itself. For the perfected actuality passes back into the temporal world, and qualifies this world so that each temporal actuality includes it as an immediate fact of relevant experience. For the kingdom of heaven is with us today. The action of the fourth phase is the love of God for the world. It is the particular providence for particular occasions. What is done in the world is transformed into a reality in heaven, and the reality in heaven passes back into the world. By reason of this reciprocal relation, the love in the world passes into the love in heaven, and floods back again into the world. In this sense, God is the great companion – the fellow-sufferer who understands.

Panentheism is a type of pantheism wherein God exists both within and beyond the world (Clayton & Peacocke, 2004, Attfield, 2019; Culp, 2023). Evil exists but only to the extent that the universe is as yet incompletely actualized. Burns (2019) proposes that God exists in two ways – one as the force that causes the actualization of the universe ("God the World") and the second as the force that maximizes the good in the world ("God the Good"). This approach provides some purpose to the world and to human striving. Everything moves towards the good. Without this aspect process theology can become heartless. To return to Hume we might have a very pessimistic view of our world:

> Look round this universe. What an immense profusion of beings, animated and organised, sensible and active! You admire this prodigious variety and fecundity. But inspect a little more narrowly these living existences, the only beings worth regarding. How hostile and destructive to each other! How insufficient all of them for their own happiness! How contemptible or odious to the spectator! The whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind Nature, impregnated

> by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children! (Hume, 1979, part XI)

The Biblical text justifying process theology and panentheism comes from Paul's sermon on the Hill of Mars in Athens

> God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;
>
> Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;
>
> And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;
>
> That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:
>
> For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said. (*Acts* 17:24-28)

In *A Corner of the Veil*, Waldenhag interprets what he has read in terms of the God the Father and God the Son

> The Father accepts everything, since He is the source of everything. But He suffers everything. There is no distance between the suffering of man and the suffering of God. And the Father risks everything in His creation. Because it is totality, creation carries within itself the germs of its own destruction. The Father is at stake there. The Son saves not only mankind, but in some way He also saves the Father. He justifies the Father's creation. (pp 254-255)

Although convinced by the proof, he still has concerns

> Man informed of the proof will finally be free, his consciousness much elevated and his actions disinterested. On the other hand, knowing that God is in everything carries the risk of legitimizing any and all behavior. . . . the brute may be confirmed in his brutality, the sadistic husband confirmed in his sadism, and so on. Amorality could take hold of mankind. (p 255)

This concern might perhaps be alleviated if we agree with Burns' concept that God is both the world becoming itself and the world becoming good.

Epilogue

At the end of the book, the Casuists present the proof to the Secretary of State for the Vatican. The final decision is not the publish the proof. All those who have read the proof will be enjoined not to repeat it to anyone. The marvelous new proof will become a pontifical secret:

> Qu'est-ce qu'un secret pontifical? – C'est une information que le Saint-Père ne doit connaître sous aucun prétexte.
>
> [What is a pontifical secret? A piece of information the Holy Father must not learn under any circumstances. (p 269)]

References

Attfield, R. (2019). Panentheisms, creation and evil. *Open Theology*, *5*(1), 166–181.

Ben Ahmed, F. & Pasnau, R. (2025). Ibn Rushd [Averroes]. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.*

Burns, E. (1999). Apocalypse now. *New York Times Book Reviews*. August 1, 1999

Burns, E. D. (2019). How to prove the existence of God: an argument for conjoined panentheism. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, *85*(1), 5–21.

Clayton, P., & Peacocke, A. R. (Eds). (2004). *In whom we live and move and have our being: Panentheistic reflections on God's presence in a scientific world*. William B. Eerdmans.

Cobb, K. (2005). *The Blackwell guide to theology and popular culture*. Blackwell

Cossé, L. (1996). *Le coin du voile*. Gallimard.

Cossé, L. (translated by Asher, L., 1999). *A corner of the veil*. Scribner.

Culp, J. (2023). Panentheism. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Dales, R. C. (1990). *Medieval discussions of the eternity of the world*. E.J. Brill.

Dumort, J. (1997), Le coin du voile. *La Jaune et la Rouge*. Nº 523.

Eder, R. (1999). A Corner of the Veil: Proof of God in a Small Brown Envelope. *New York Times*. (18 July)

Goldstein, R. (2010). *36 arguments for the existence of God: a work of fiction*. Pantheon Books.

Hume, D. (1779, reprinted 2006). *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Dover Publications.

Jonsen, A. R. (2005). Practical reasoning and moral casuistry. In Schweiker, W. (Ed.) *The Blackwell companion to religious ethics*. (pp 53-60). Blackwell.

Mackie, J. L. (1982). *The miracle of theism: arguments for and against the existence of God*. Clarendon Press.

McCombie, (1999). A Question of Faith: A new French novel slyly probes the limits of faith in our modern world. *The Free Library* (September, 1, 1999).

McInerny, R. (1999). End Notes: Martyrum Candidatus Laudat Exercitus. Crisis Magazine (February 1, 1999).

Pasnau, R. (2024). Thomas Aquinas. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Perrine, T. (2025). Humean arguments from evil against theism. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

Picton, T. W. (2013). *Creature and Creator: intersections between science and religion*. Picton.

Polzer, J. (1993). The “Triumph of Thomas” panel in Santa Caterina, Pisa. Meaning and date. *Mitteilungen Des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, *37*(1), 29–70.

Restivo, S. P. (2021). *Society and the death of God*. Routledge.

Speak, D. (2014). *The problem of evil*. Polity Press.

Van Inwagen, P. (2006). *The problem of evil*. Oxford University Press.

Whitehead, A. N. (1929). *Process and reality, an essay in cosmology*. Macmillan.

Wittgenstein, L. (translated by P. Wench & edited by Wright, G. H. von, 1980). *Culture and value*. University of Chicago Press.

Robert Davidson: Serigraphs

Robert Davidson, one of Canada's greatest artists, is one of the Haida people, whose ancestral territories are in the Haida Gwaii archipelago off the coast of British Columbia and the southern half of Prince of Wales Island in Alaska. His Haida name is *G_uud San Glans*, which means "Eagle of the Dawn." Davidson is a talented carver of argillite, jewelry and totem poles, a creator of striking masks, and a master of silkscreen printing (serigraphy).

Life

Robert Davidson was born in Hydaburg ("Haida city") Alaska in 1946. His father, Claude Davidson, was a fisherman from the village of Dadens on Haida Gwaii, and an important carver in argillite, a black stone found in Slatechuck Mountain in the southern part of Moore Island. Robert's maternal great-grandfather was Charles Edenshaw (1839-1920), a renowned carver from Masset (Wright & Augaitis, 2013). In 1947, the Davidson family moved back to Masset, where Robert spent his childhood and adolescence. In 1965 he attended high school in Vancouver. When he began carving argillite sculptures in 1966, he met Bill Reid (1920-1998; Shadbolt, 1986) and worked in his studio for 18 months.

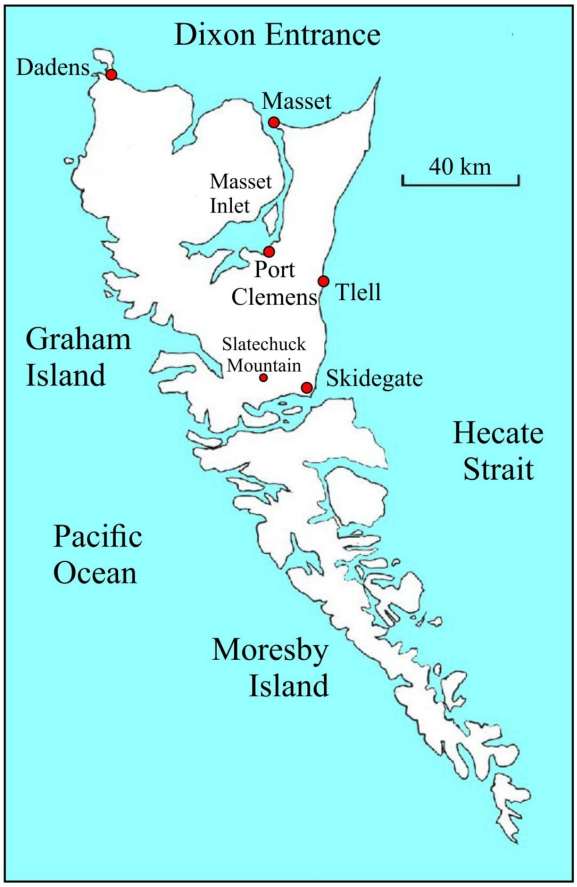
Davison began experimenting with silk screen printing in 1968 at the Gitanmaax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art in Hazelton, in the interior of British Columbia. He produced several prints in unnumbered editions in 1969, among them, *Sea Bear Box Back* and *Sea Bear Box Front*. Later in 1969 he carved a new totem pole for the village of Masset, sending out invitations to the potlatch and pole-raising adorned with a silk screen print that combined Eagle and Raven figures (see above). Eagle and Raven are the two main moieties of the Haida lineage. Davidson continued to carve totem poles throughout his life. In the 21st Century he produced some large aluminum

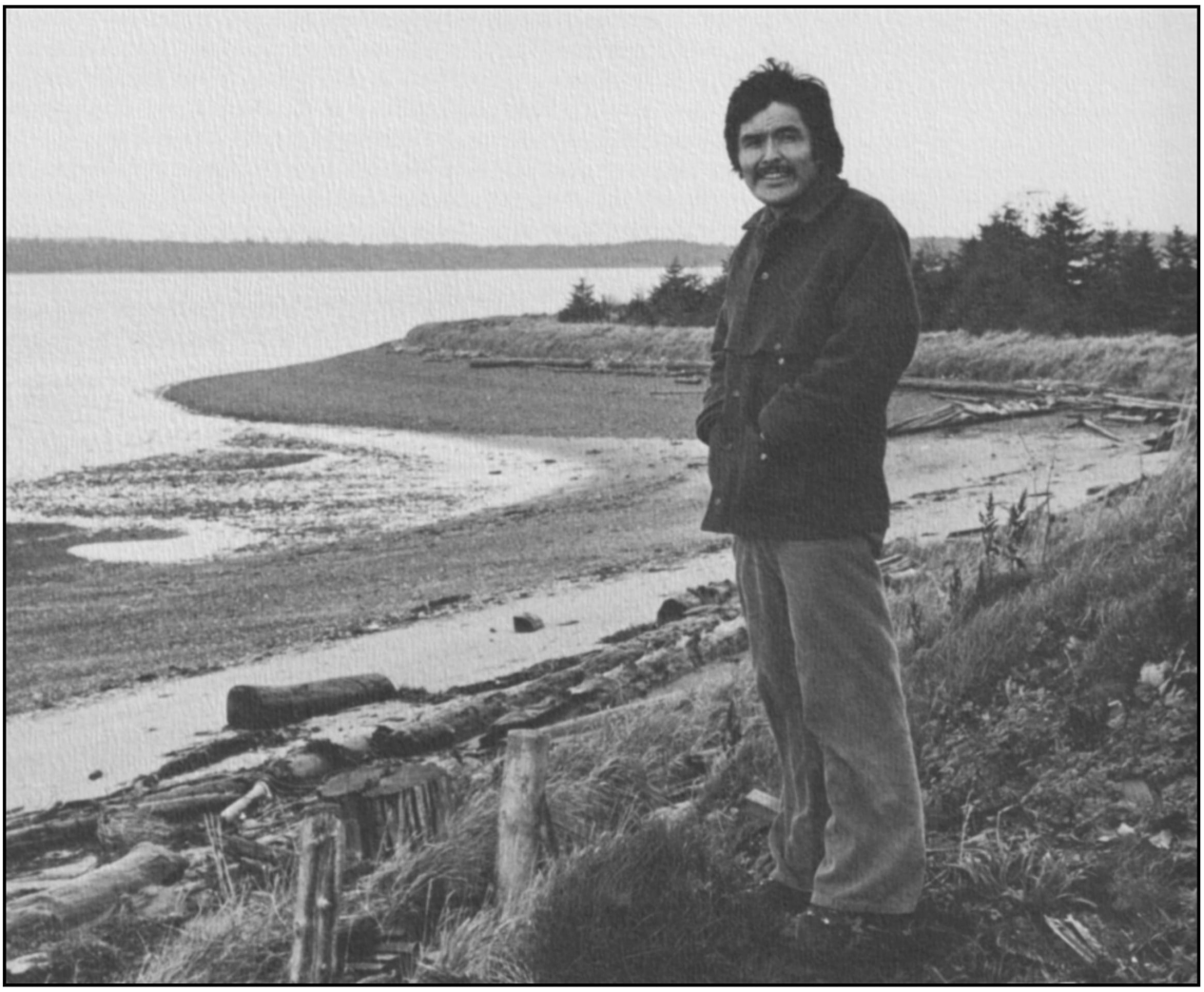
sculptures of Haida design forms.

In 1970, Davidson moved back to Vancouver and published his first limited edition serigraph, *Killer Whale*. Since then, he has continued to produced serigraphs, usually at a rate of several per year. Wyatt (2022) documents over 150 prints between 1968 and 2022.

The designs of the early serigraphs were based on old Haida paintings and carvings. In the 21st Century, Davidson began to use more abstract designs, though still using original Haida art forms. These formed the basis of his exhibition *Abstract Impulse* (Brotherton et al, 2013). At about this time, he also began to base his serigraph designs on original acrylic-on-canvas paintings rather than preparatory drawings.

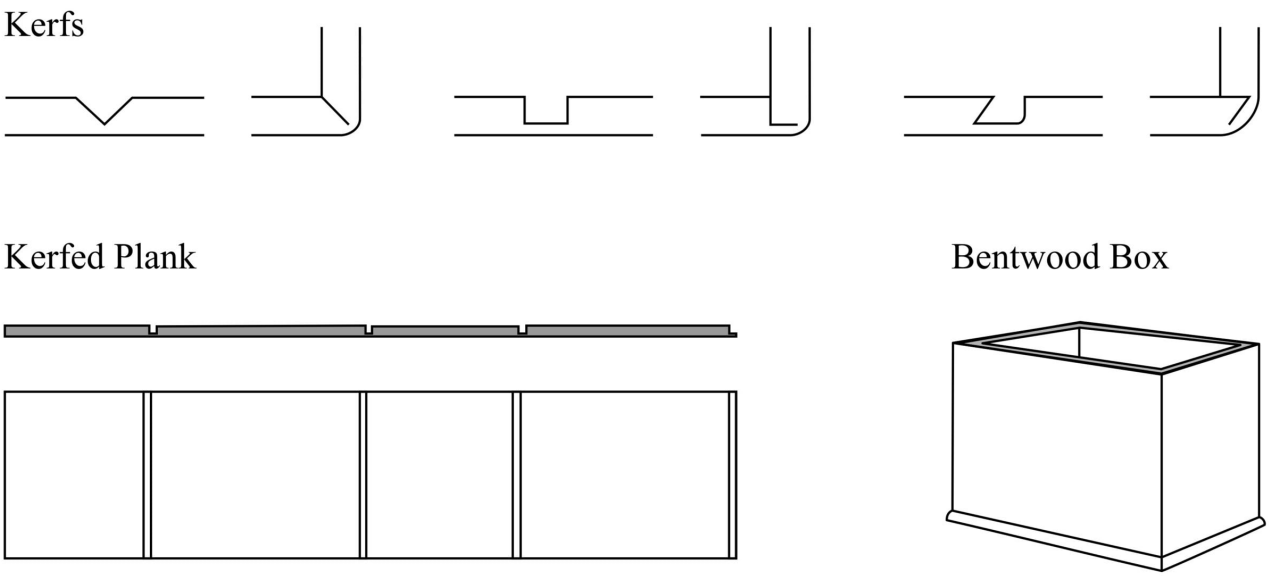
The following illustrations show the location of Haida Gwaii, and a photograph by Ulli Steltzer of Robert Davidson on Old Masset beach in 1978.





Bentwood Boxes

Haida artists painted on the walls of their houses, on their furniture, and on bentwood boxes. Their designs were often supplemented by carving. Many old bentwood boxes have survived. The following illustration shows the technique of making these boxes. Specially measured grooves – kerfs – are cut in a cedar plank; the plank is then steamed to make it pliable and bent into box form; the free edges are joined by glue, sewing or pegs:



The following is a famous 19th-Century bentwood box attributed to Charles Edenshaw, now in the Canadian Museum of History:

The central section shows a high-relief carving of a beaver. The box is large (142 by 58 cm) and only carved one side. MacDonald (1996) suggests that it may have initially been constructed as a burial chest, to be displayed at the top of a mortuary totem pole.

Another famous box – called the *Great Box* – was collected in 1884 and is now in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. In 2014,

modern Haida carvers Jaalen and Gwaii Edenshaw constructed a replica of this box. The design represents a sea monster, a mythical being perhaps related to the Orca. The monster has double eyes; its upper limbs have fingers and its lower limbs are flippers. The sea monster was meant to protect the contents of the box. The following illustration shows the original and the replica:

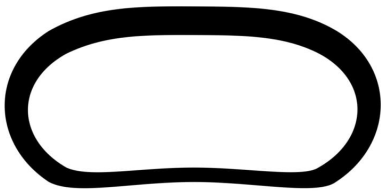
A Vocabulary of Forms

From studying the designs on bentwood boxes and other carvings, scholars have identified a basic vocabulary of forms used by Haida artists for representation and decoration (Holm, 1965; Holm & Reid, 1975; Stewart, 1979a; Gilbert &Clark, 1999, 2002).

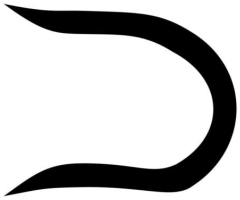
A basic feature of Northwest Coast art is the “formline.” This is used to construct the basic design and to outline the anatomy of the subject being represented. The formline is typically black, but occasionally red. The formline varies in thickness, often tapering at junctions between major parts of the overall form.

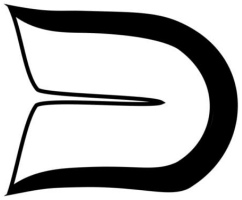
The spaces within the formline can be filled with various forms that represent details, such as eyes and mouths, or that simply fill in the outlined spaces. These forms can be black or red depending on the importance of the detail. Sometimes a third color (usually blue-green) or cross-hatching is used for forms of lesser importance. Some spaces may be outlined by thin lines.

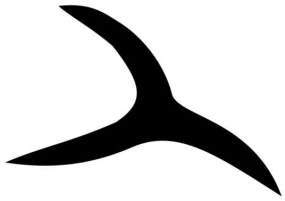
Various forms are shown below. Probably the most important form is the ovoid. Various theories have been proposed for the original source of this form. My preferred idea is that it represents a salmon egg resting on a surface. The U-Form is likely derived from one half of the ovoid. The trigone probably comes from extending the U-Form out into a third point. The bottom of the illustration shows examples of how and an eye and a feather can be composed from the simpler forms. The thin lines in the eye represent the eyelids.

Ovoid 

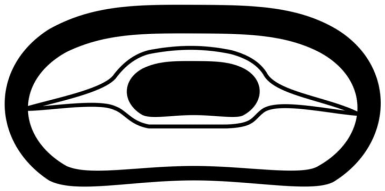
Circle 

U-Form 

Split U-Form 

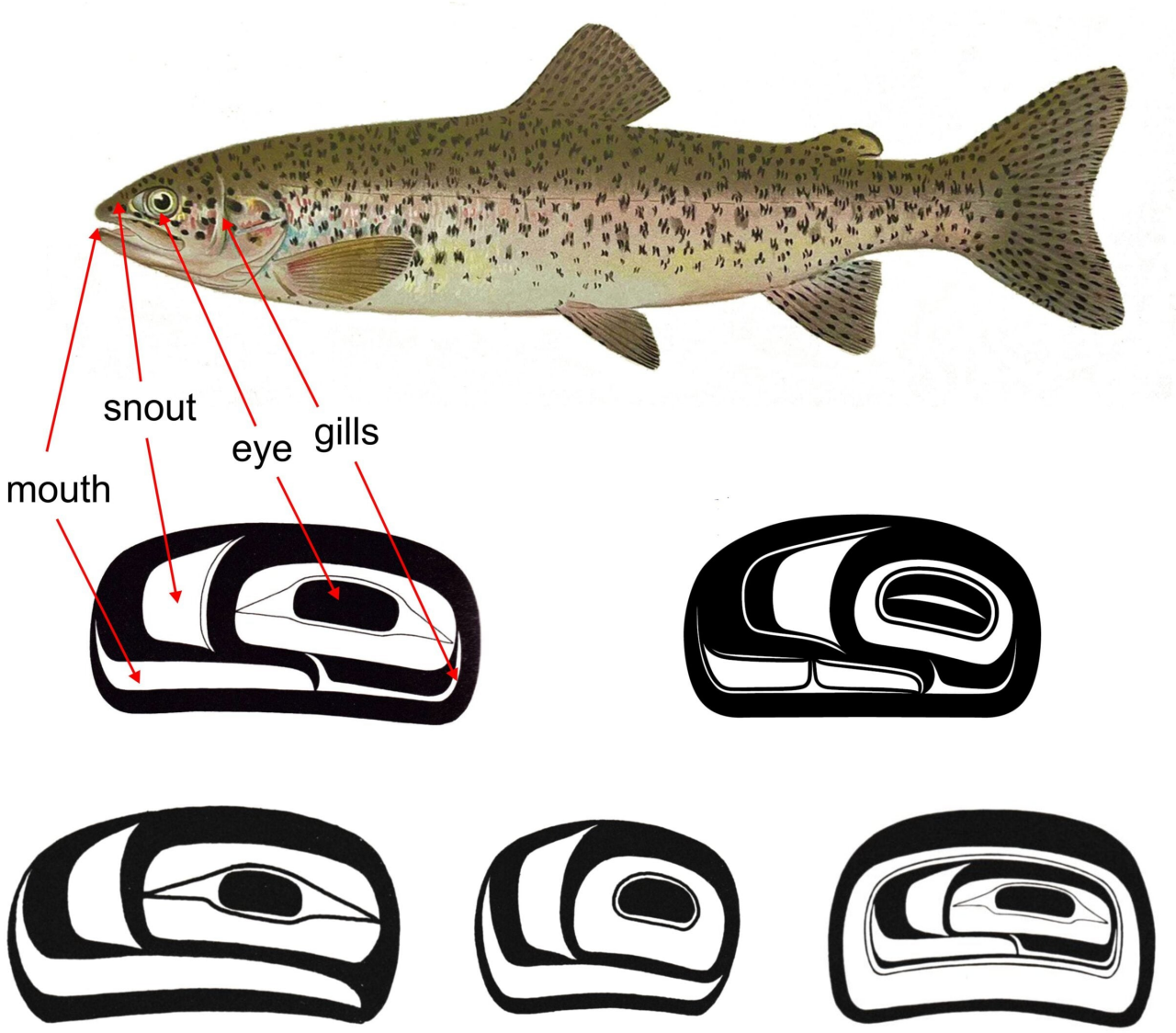
Trigone 

S-Form 

Eye 

Feather 

One common complex form is called the “salmon trout head.” Its derivation and various examples are illustrated below. The print of the steelhead salmon (also known as a salmon trout) was made in 1900 by Sherman Denton. Although it can represent an actual salmon head, the form is also used for other structures such as the joints of limbs, the palms of hands and the fins of fishes.



Three general rules are often (but not always) used in the overall design. The first rule is to fill the space, be it a rectangular box, or a circular drum. The second rule is to keep the forms symmetrical. The third is to include forms within forms in a recursive manner.

Robert Davidson closely studied the forms and designs on some of the old bentwood boxes. Two of his early serigraphs from 1969 were *Sea Bear Box Front* and *Sea Bear Box Back*. These designs do not represent a specific bentwood box, but rather illustrate the general idea of such boxes. The following illustration below (right) shows *Sea Bear Box Back*. In the belly of the monster can be seen an upside-down *Kugann Jaad*, or mouse woman, with two large eyes and a smiling mouth. The

previously described *Great Box* also shows this feature. *Kugann Jaad*, who is able to shape-shift between mouse and woman, acts as an intermediary between human beings and the supernatural, and makes sure things happen as they should (e.g. Harris & Tait, 1976). Features of *Kugann Jaad* are also shown at the top of the Davidson's design between the two ears of the monster. The illustration compares the Davidson print (on the right) to an actual bentwood box in the Canadian Museum of History:

The Davidson print shows the monster with hands on its forelimbs and flippers (with salmon-head centers) on its hind limbs. Within each ear is a representation of a human face seen in profile: eyebrow, eye, nostril and mouth.

In 1975 Davidson published the following print in bentbox format: *Raven with a Broken Beak.* A famous Haida story tells how the great shape-shifter Raven, when playing in the form of a salmon, was captured on a fisherman's hook, and broke his beak trying to escape (Reid & Bringhurst, 1984).

The break in the beak is shown by the circle in the center of the print. The Raven, like many supernatural being has double eyes. In the bottom corners of the print are the Raven's wings with the joint between wing and body represented by a variant of the salmon trout head. In the Raven's mouth are representations of human faces: the Raven is able to talk to human beings.

For the opening of the Bent Box Gallery in Vancouver in 1978, Davidson produced a print entitled *Bent Box Design*. The central section of the serigraph is effectively a self-portrait. The outer persona is represented in black formlines. In the lower body the inner artist is outlined in red formlines.

Four Circles

In 1977, Davidson brought out a set of four small (20 by 20 cm) prints: *Raven, Eagle, Whale*, and *Frog*. Each print portrayed the essential features of the creature within the bounds of the circular form.

Raven is the great transformer, able to change between bird and human forms. In the print this is shown by the small human face at the top of its head. Another characteristic of Raven is the broken beak that it suffered when, in the form of a salmon, it was hooked by fishermen. In the print the broken

beak lies between the two wings.

Eagle is seen in profile. In the print the characteristic down-curved beak is placed between the head and wing. The ovoid in the upper beak represents the bird’s nostril.

Whale is depicted with its large mouth between the head and the two pectoral fins. At the right, the large circle represents the blowhole. Unlike the other prints of this set, this is composed mainly in black.

The lower half of the frog print shows the face of Frog, with its large toothless mouth, big eyes and nostrils. The upper half shows the body in black and the limbs in red.

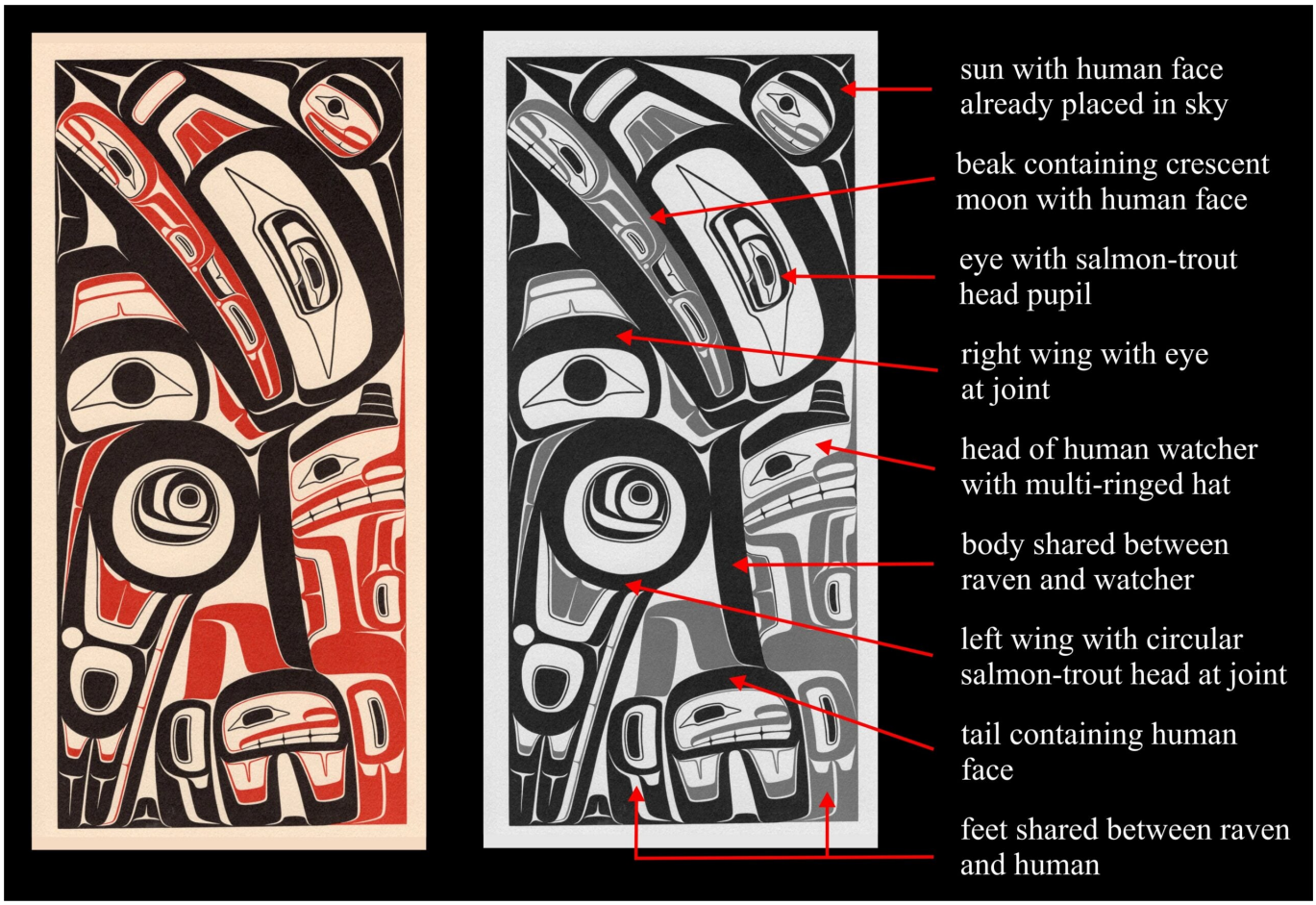
Raven Stealing the Light

One of the most famous stories of Raven is that he stole the sun and the moon from the Old Man, who kept them hidden in a box for his daughter to play with. The curious Raven transformed himself into the form of a young boy and became part of the Old Man’s household. The Ravenchild asked the Old Man if he could hold the lights, but for a long while the Old Man refused. When at last the Old Man relented, Raven stole

the bright lights, flew through the smokehole of the Old Man's house, and ultimately released the sun, moon and stars into a world that had before been completely dark. The Old Man was upset over the loss of his precious lights, but he looked around

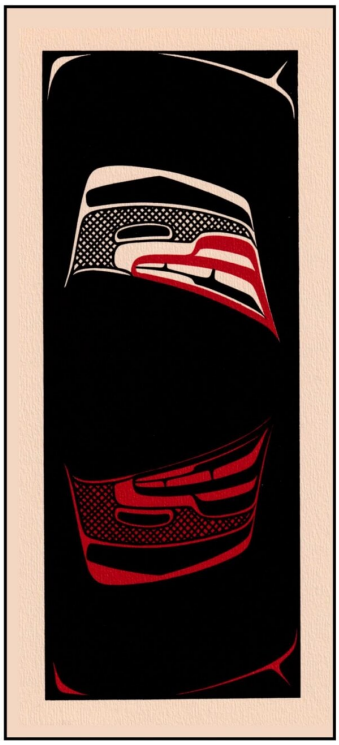
and for the first time saw his daughter, who had been quietly sitting during all this time, completely bewildered by the rush of events. The old man saw that she was as beautiful as the fronds of a hemlock against a spring sky at sunrise, and he began to feel a little better. (Reid & Bringhurst, 1984, p 17).

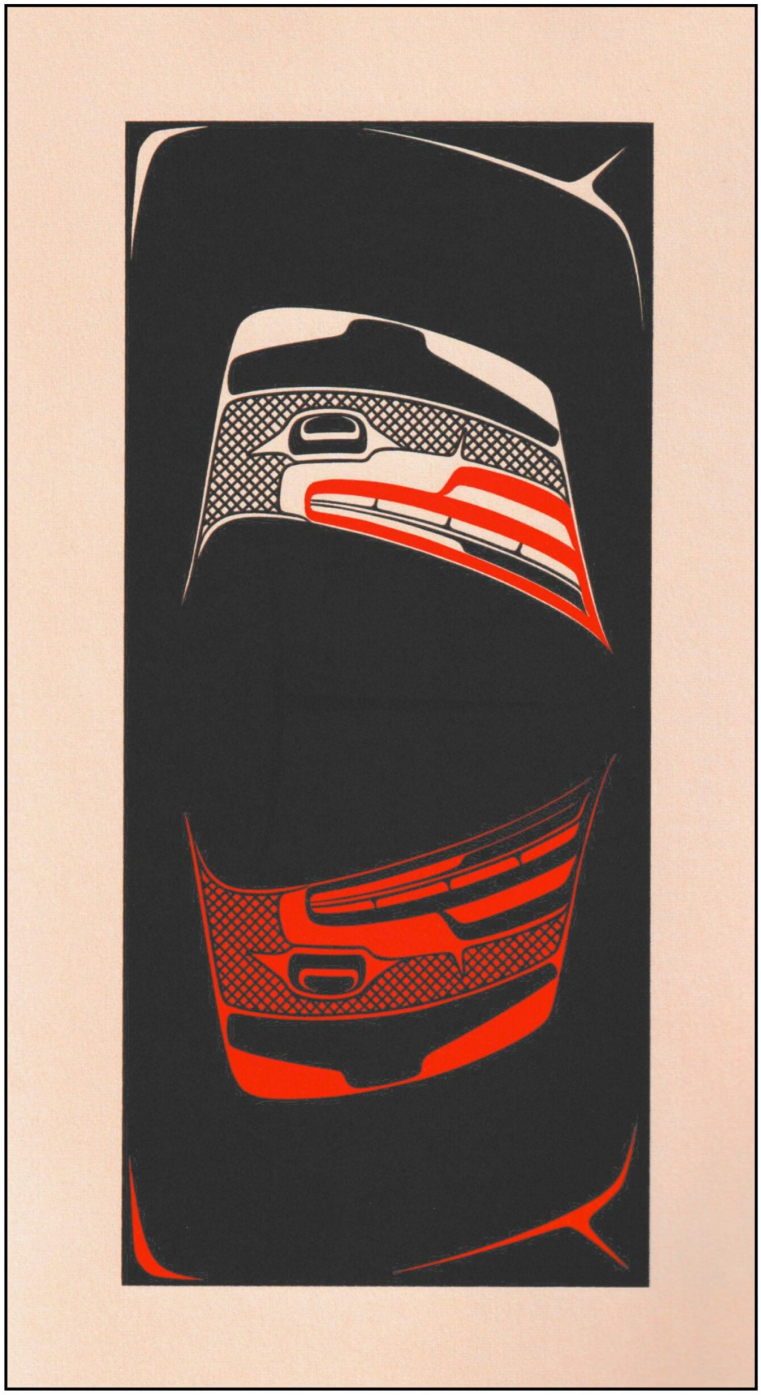
In 1977 Davidson created a print that told the story: *Raven Stealing the Moon* (Stewart, 1979a, p 37). The print shows Raven releasing the moon; the sun is already in the sky at the upper right. It is difficult to be sure of what is represented by the human figure on the lower right. This may be the Old Man, a chief of the Haida people, who stand to benefit from Raven's thievery, or a human watchman observing the supernatural happenings.



Reflections

In 1975, Davidson printed a small (10 by 22 cm) Christmas card entitled *Negative and Positive* (below left) The upper image of a human face in profile was inverted and repeated on a red background below. In 1977 he reworked the earlier image to make a larger (32 by 57 cm) print entitled *Reflections* (below right) The face was made more detailed: the eye has taken on eyelid forms, and there are more teeth. The most intriguing aspect of the new print is the split-U form that is overprinted in red on the black center of the print. The fold between object and representation, between reality and imagination. This subtle addition is almost impossible to see on reproductions:

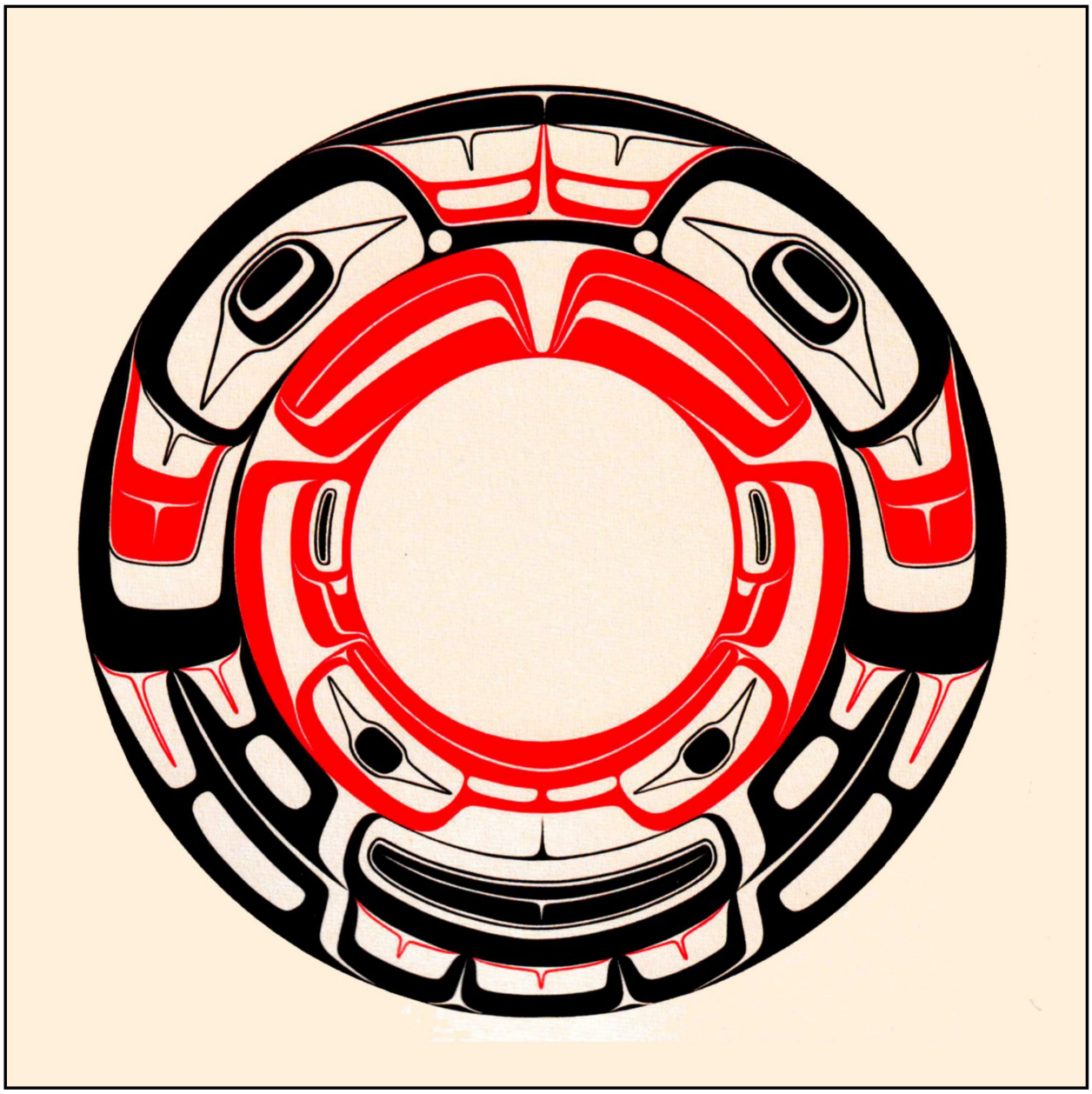




Eagle

In 1979, the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology presented *Cycles*, an exhibition of Davidson's graphic work. Davidson produced a special print *Eagle* for the exhibition. An outer black Eagle contains an inner red Frog. These two are interconnected: the red beak of the Eagle forms

the hindlimbs of the Frog and the red tail of the Eagle forms the mouth of the Frog.



The following is Marjorie Halpin’s description of the print (Halpin, 1979, p10) with a quotation from Davidson in italics:

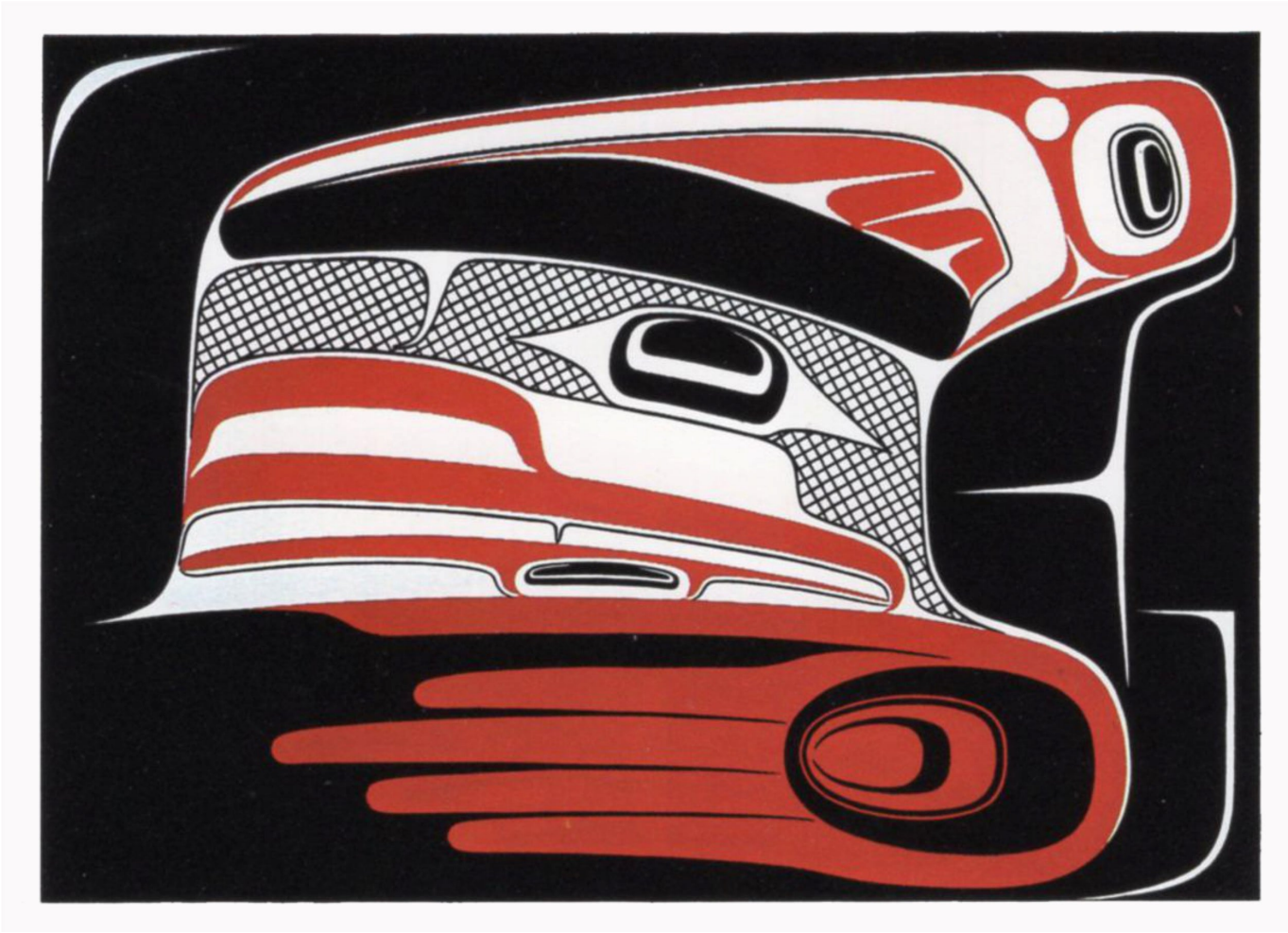
> The eagle, shown in the outer black segment of the circle, is his outer person, his social self, that part of him that the world sees. In-side, the red middle circle. is the frog. *The inner self, the heart, the gut reaction. Love. This is the first time I allowed the feeling to show, to help the outside. Without the inner frog, the eagle isn’t complete.*

If you take the frog away, the eagle has no mouth.

Although, at first look, the black outer eagle and the red inner frog seem sharply separated from each other, totally separate and distinct, there is continual interaction between them expressed by interpenetrating elements of each in the other. This is most obvious in the eagle's mouth, which is totally red and in the frog circle, but it occurs at even more subtle levels as well. The narrow black formline that connects the frog's eyes and completes the red circle, for example, is repeated in a white or negative formline in the black ovoid of the outer circle. These and other interpenetrations can be read as symbols of integration, of the combination of opposites, into a new unity or wholeness. We might call it a Haida yin/yang.

Forms within Forms

The interpenetration of forms is clearly evident in a set of large prints from 1983. In *Ti-Silii-AA-Lis (Raven Finned Killer Whale)*, the details of Raven are placed in the form of the dorsal fin of a Killer Whale. At the bottom is a human hand (perhaps the human aspect of Raven) that could also be the pectoral fin of the whale.



Wolf Inside Its Own Foot uses a recursive design. The large wolf is located within the overall black form of its foot. And a smaller red wolf is located within the form of the large wolf’s foot:

Thunderbird

The Thunderbird is a supernatural being common to the myths of many North American indigenous people. This all-powerful deity created thunder by flapping its wings and lightning by flashing its eyes. The Thunderbird has a large crest (often coiled) on the top of its head, which gives it power. Early in his career, Davidson produced a beautiful traditional print of *Thunderbird* (1979). Within the body of the Thunderbird is represented a Woodpecker in red formlines (below left). In 2006, Davidson created a large acrylic painting of *Hiilang (Thunderbird).* The design is stripped to its essentials; the crest on the head, the eye, the wing, the body, leg and talons (below right). The representation has become almost abstract. When the canvas was stretched the lower edge which had been painted green became part of the image (Wyatt, 2022, p 19). The green stripe provided a gentle ground for the stark image, and was maintained for the serigraphic reproductions.

Bird in the Air

Over the past twenty years, Davidson’s prints have become more and more abstract. The print *Bird in the Air* (2016) places an ovoid representation of an eagle within a large yellow trigone form that may represent the eagle’s beak, the ovoid being the nostril (below right). The illustration below shows the print together with two photographs of the eagle:

Davidson has been intrigued by the concept of “Bird in the Air” and how this seems to encapsulate the spirit of the Haida. The following illustration shows a recent small aluminum sculpture entitled *Bird in the Air* (2013, 28 cm high) by Davidson, and compares it to the 19th Century silver bracelet carved by Davidson’s great-grandfather Charles Edenshaw (Wright & Augaitis, 2013, p 144).

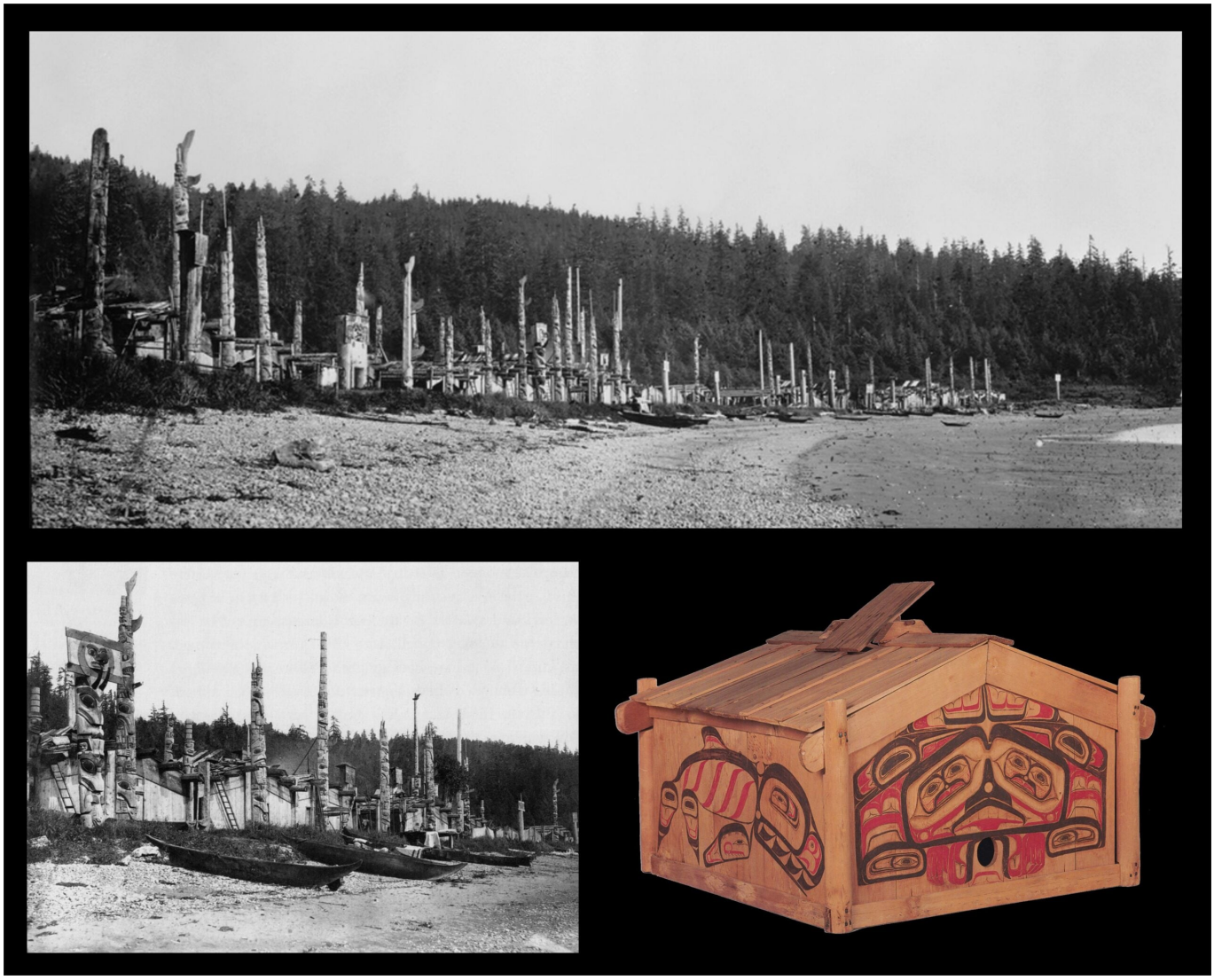
The Recent History of the Haida People

In the late 18th Century, it is estimated that the Haida population was somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000 people. The first recorded encounter between the Haida and Europeans was in 1774 when the ship of the Spanish explorer Juan Perez anchored outside Haida Gwaii and was visited by Haida canoes. In 1787, the British captain George Dixon traded with the Haida for sea-otter furs. He named the islands after Queen Charlotte, the wife of Goerge III. Subsequently, the Haida interacted with European whalers and fur traders. In this way the Haida came into possession of European tools and weapons. Shortly after gold was discovered on Haida Gwaii in 1850, the Canadian government annexed the Queen Charlotte Islands.

In 1862, a passenger infected with smallpox arrived in Fort Victoria on Vancouver Island. This center for the fur trade later became city of Victoria, British Columbia. The disease spread rapidly through the indigenous people of the Northwest, many of whom had travelled to Vancouver Island to trade. Although the white colonizers protected themselves by vaccinations and quarantine procedures, the government did not make these measures available to the indigenous people. Instead, they burned indigenous settlements where the infection had broken out, and forced the Haida to retreat back to Haida Gwaii. By 1881, the Haida population had been reduced to below 1000 people (Macdonald, 1996, p 223, estimates that it may have been as low as 500 by 1900).

In 1876, Christian missionaries arrived on Haida Gwaii. They thought the totem poles represented idols rather than family histories and urged the Haida to destroy them or risk not going to heaven. Together the church and the government outlawed the Potlatch ceremonies (Davidson& Davidson, 2013), and set up the Indian Residential School System.

The first photographs of the Haida Gwaii settlements were taken by George Dawson in 1878. Even at that early date many of the buildings were unoccupied, and many of the poles were mortuary poles rather than simple totems. By the time of Chicago World Fair in 1893, only a few buildings remained. One building and several totem poles from Skidegate were dismantled and taken to the fair, Several Haida artists were commissioned to make models of the other houses at Skidegate (Wright 2024). These models remain; the original buildings are no more. The following illustration show two of Dawson's original photographs of Skidegate, and a modern photograph of one of the house models that was displayed at the fair:



Despite ravaging disease and cultural genocide, the Haida people have survived. In 2010 the islands reverted to their

indigenous name Haida Gawai (Islands of the Haida). Today the Haida form a thriving cultural community. The population is now about 5000.

The survival of Haida culture is in part due to the tenacity and creativity of their artists. In 1969, Robert Davidson erected the first new pole in Masset in over 90 years: the 12-meter *Bear Mother Pole*. In 1978 Bill Reid erected the 16-meter *Dogfish Pole* in Skidegate. The following illustration shows on the left a totem in front of a derelict house in Kayung as photographed by Richard Maynard in 1884. The remaining people from Kayung on the east side of Masset Inlet had by then moved to the nearby village of Masset. The pole is presently in the British Museum. The middle totem is the *Bear Mother Pole* from 1969 and the right is the *Dogfish Pole* from 1978.

The serigraph technique initially used by Robert Davidson to present Haida designs, has become widespread among Haida artists. Their prints provide an easy way for the Haida to

preserve the images of their culture, and to proclaim its beauty to the rest of the world.

Some sense of the Davidson's determination can be found in an address that he gave on Haida Culture in 1991 (reprinted in Augaitis, 2006, pp 48-55). The following paragraphs are from the beginning and the end of that address:

> We call ourselves *Xaadaa 7Iaa Isiss*, "The Good People." The common derivative has become "Haida People." We are the survivors of a once proud and prosperous nation who enjoyed the fruits, beauty, and magic of the place we call Haida Gwaii. Our philosophy has been to be generous and hospitable to the new people who we came to call the *Yaats Xaadee*, "Iron People." The arrival of outsiders began a time of great change in our history, our values and our outlook on life. We have suffered great losses since the arrival of the *Yaats Xaadee*, of our population, cultural knowledge, and especially our self-esteem, our sense of identity; members of a whole generation were denied their own cultural values. There have been many changes, some of them good, and some from which we are still recovering. …
>
> The next thing we need to reclaim is our language. Language holds insights and philosophies of our culture. It will add to the foundation we are rebuilding, as a nation, from the frustrations that came through my parents' generation, from the experiences they lived through as children. It can come only from us as Haida People. The benefits we gain can only come from the efforts we put into reclaiming our ancestral values. Our forefathers had a position in the world, they had an understanding of their universe through generations of development. It is now time for us to regain our place in the world. It has been over two hundred years since the *Yaats Xaadee* first arrived on the shores of Haida Gwaii. This is a very short time in our development as a people. We have experienced many changes to date, we have suffered great losses, we have survived many obstacles, we have

gained many new insights, but through it all our spirit is still alive. We cannot carry the burdens of confusion, self-abuse and lost identity anymore. It is our responsibility to pick up the pieces and mend them, to become whole again as a healthy, progressive, contributing and developing people.

A Man of Many Talents

This essay has focused on Robert Davidson's serigraphs. He is also renowned for his carvings in argillite, silver jewelry, masks and carved poles (Stewart, 1979b; Thom, 1993; Steltzer, 1994; Rhyne, 1998; Davidson website). The following illustration shows an argillite carving with figures of bear, raven and eagle from top to bottom (height 18 cm), a silver bracelet with Beaver design, a Bear mask and the 1989 pole *Breaking the Totem Barrier* (height 6 meters).

Hope

We can conclude with a recent print entitled *Hope* (2024). This has become almost completely abstract although one can sense the feathers (below). It represents an idea rather than a creature. The print may refer to the poem by Emily Dickinson, written around 1861:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

I've heard it in the chillest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.

Emily Dickinson

Robert Davidson

References

Augaitis, D. (2006). *Raven travelling: two centuries of Haida art*. Vancouver Art Gallery.

Bringhurst, R. (1999). *A story as sharp as a knife: the classical Haida mythtellers and their world*. Douglas & McIntyre.

Brotherton, B., Farr, S., Haworth, J. (2013). *Robert Davidson: abstract impulse*. Seattle Art Museum.

Davidson, S. F., & Davidson, R. (2018). *Potlatch as pedagogy: learning through ceremony*. Portage & Main Press.

Gilbert, J., & Clark, K. (volume 1, 1999; volume 2, 2002). *Learning by designing: Pacific Northwest Coast Native Indian art*. Raven.

Halpin, M. M. (1979). Cycles: the graphic art of Robet Davidson, Haida. Museum Note 7. UBC Museum of Anthropology.

Harris, C., & Tait, D. (1976). *Mouse woman and the vanished princesses.* McClelland & Stewart

Holm, B., (1965). *Northwest coast Indian art: an analysis of form*. University of Washington.

Holm, B., & Reid, B. (1975). *Indian art of the Northwest coast: a dialogue on craftsmanship and aesthetics*. University of Washington Press.

MacDonald, G. F. (1996). *Haida art*. Douglas & McIntyre.

Reid, B., & Bringhurst, R. (1984). *The raven steals the light*. Douglas & McIntyre.

Rhyne, C. (1998). *Expanding the circle: the art of guud san glans, Robert Davidson*. Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College.

Shadbolt, D. (1986). *Bill Reid*. Douglas & McIntyre.

Steltzer, U. (1994). *Eagle transforming: the art of Robert Davidson*. Douglas & McIntyre.

Stewart, H. (1979a). *Looking at Indian art of the Northwest Coast*. Douglas & McIntyre.

Stewart, H. (1979b). *Robert Davidson: Haida printmaker*.

Douglas & McIntyre.

Thom, I. M. (1993). *Robert Davidson: eagle of the dawn*. Vancouver Art Gallery.

Wright, R. K. (2024). *Skidegate house models: from Haida Gwaii to the Chicago World's Fair and beyond (Hlg_aagilda naa gii niijing.a k'ad.dala k_wan: X_aayda Gwaay.yaay sdaa uu Chicago Tllgaay K_'aaysguux_an gud ad is*). University of Washington Press.

Wright, R. K & Augaitis, D. (2013). *Charles Edenshaw*. Blackdog Publishing.

Wyatt, G. (2022). *Echoes of the supernatural: the graphic art of Robert Davidson*. Figure.1.

Knowledge of Good and Evil

According to the book of Genesis, Yahweh created Adam and Eve to live in the Garden of Eden. He commanded them on pain of death not to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. However, Eve was convinced by the Serpent to eat of the tree, and she in turn convinced Adam to do the same. For their disobedience, Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden. The interpretation of this myth has led to the Christian idea that humanity is forever tainted by "Original Sin," and that our only hope for immortality is through the sacrifice of Christ which offers redemption from sin and entry into eternity to those who believe in him. The concept of Original Sin has become dangerously ingrained in Christian thinking, and needs reworking,

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil

The book of Genesis contains two narratives of the creation. In the second (*Genesis* 2:4-25), attributed to a writer/editor called *J* (Rosenberg & Bloom, 1990), Yahweh created Adam by breathing into a lump of earth, and placed him in a garden in Eden. He then grew the trees of the garden:

> And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. (*Genesis* 2: 9)

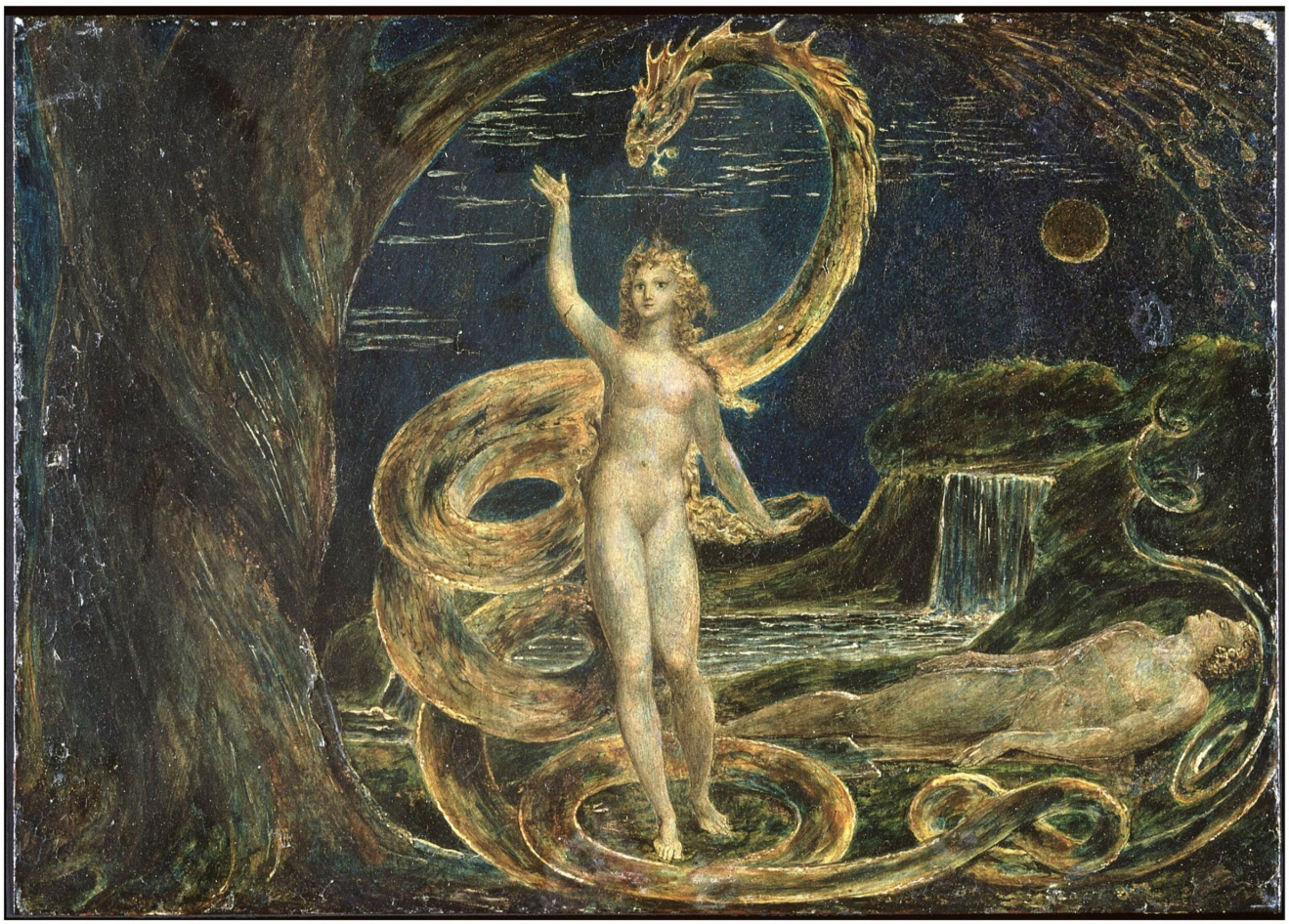
Yahweh enjoined Adam not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil:

> And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat
> But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (*Genesis* 2: 16-17)

J then tells how God created Eve as a companion for Adam, and narrates the story of man's fall from innocence (*Genesis* 3: 1-24). Eve was asked by the Serpent whether she and Adam must not eat from any of the trees of Eden:

> And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden:
> But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. (*Genesis* 3: 2-3)

The Serpent convinces her that eating of the Tree of Knowledge would actually open her eyes to the divine knowledge of good and evil. The interaction between Eve and the Serpent is the subject of many paintings, among which is the tempera painting of William Blake (1800) in the Victoria and Albert Museum. This and the subsequent illustrations are derived from the Blake Archive:



Eve ate the fruit and gave some to Adam who likewise ate. Yahweh quickly realized how Adam and Eve had disobeyed him.

> And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever
> Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.
> So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life. (*Genesis* 3: 22-24)

The expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden is depicted in an 1808 watercolor by William Blake which was to illustrate the ending of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674). In this telling of the story, the archangel Michael leads Adam and Eve out of

Paradise:

For now, too nigh
The Arch-Angel stood; and, from the other hill

> To their fixed station, all in bright array
> The Cherubim descended; on the ground
> Gliding meteorous, as evening-mist
> Risen from a river o’er the marish glides,
> And gathers ground fast at the labourer’s heel
> Homeward returning. High in front advanced,
> The brandished sword of God before them blazed,
> Fierce as a comet; which with torrid heat,
> And vapour as the Libyan air adust,
> Began to parch that temperate clime; whereat
> In either hand the hastening Angel caught
> Our lingering parents, and to the eastern gate
> Led them direct, and down the cliff as fast
> To the subjected plain; then disappeared.
> They, looking back, all the eastern side beheld
> Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,
> Waved over by that flaming brand; the gate
> With dreadful faces thronged, and fiery arms:
> Some natural tears they dropt, but wiped them soon;
> The world was all before them, where to choose
> Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
> They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,
> Through Eden took their solitary way.

Though Milton’s words portray the gravity of what has happened to Adam and Eve, they are also touched with hope. They had each other; their eyes were open; they could learn to survive; perhaps they might even thrive. The world was all before them.

The story of Adam and Eve and how they disobeyed Yahweh’s commandment not to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil has been retold again and again in the years since it was first written down in Judeo-Christian scripture (Greenblatt, 2017). In the Christian world it led to the idea of “Original Sin” (Boyce, 2015): because of the transgression of Adam and Eve, all human beings are doomed to die, unless they accept Christ as their savior.

One or Two Trees?

Yahweh's prohibition and Eve's words to the Serpent suggest that there is only one special tree in the garden: the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. One is therefore tempted to re-examine the first mention of the two trees. The conjunction between them may be translated both as "and" and as "that is to say". Thus, the Tree of Life, may just be another name for the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and *Genesis* 2:9 might read

> the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, that is to say, the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

However, when Yahweh condemned Adam and Eve for their transgression, he did so lest they also partake of the Tree of Life and become immortal. Those supporting the existence of only one special tree in Eden have suggested that perhaps the word translated as "also" might actually mean "again." The issues about one or two trees have been discussed by Makowiecki (2021) and Zevelt (2013, Chapter 7).

My preferred interpretation is that there is only one special tree, that eating of that tree opens the mind to knowledge, and that, if our knowledge becomes great enough, we might somehow become immortal.

Good and Evil

The phrase "good and evil" needs two important explications. The first is that it is an example of a merism, "a figure of speech in which opposite extremes imply everything between them" (Robinson, 2024, p 77). When we say that we searched "high and low" we mean that we searched everywhere. The Bible makes frequent use of the device: the expression "heavens and the earth" (*Genesis* 1:1) includes everything between; "evening and morning" (*Genesis* 1:5) means the whole day (including afternoon and night); "alpha and omega" (*Revelations* 22: 13) means the complete alphabet of existence. Thus, the tree of

knowledge of good and evil is the tree of all knowledge characterized by the extremes of good and evil.

The second point of explication concerns the word translated as “evil.” The original Hebrew word can mean both “bad” and “evil” (Kass, 2003, p 63, see also Speiser, 1964, and Rosenberg & Bloom, 1990). Both are value judgements. However, we often conceive of “evil” as pain and suffering that is intentionally rather than naturally caused. Thus, though murder is considered evil, an earthquake is not. However, this distinction becomes fuzzy if we believe the natural world to be controlled by divine intentions. Arnold (2008, p 64) points out that God created both good and evil. In the words of God proclaimed through his prophet Isaiah:

> I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things. (*Isaiah*, 45: 7)

According to our definitions of “evil” and “bad,” knowledge of good and bad could then refer to everything, whereas knowledge of good and evil is primarily concerned with moral judgements (Hartmann, 2002, Chapter V; Laird, 2014, Chapter V). I much prefer to interpret the story of Eden in the latter sense. A moral judgement combines an assessment of what we perceive with a decision about what we should do in the light of the predicted consequences. Morality requires a consciousness of a self that can control one’s actions, or in religious terms, a soul that has free will. The very act of disobeying is an exercise of such free will.

When the eyes or Adam and Eve were opened by the knowledge of good and evil, the first thing that they noted was their shame at being naked. This combines self-consciousness with the idea that one should not unnecessarily incite the lust of others.

Kass (2004, p 68) sums up his discussion of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad:

> The knowledge prohibited is autonomous knowledge of how to

> live, found in or procured from one's own garden (nature), based on human experience of the visible world. The opposite of obedience, it is the kind of knowledge that is implicit in the act of violating a prohibition, indeed, in any act of choosing for oneself.

He goes on to say that this knowledge may not be sufficient for us to behave as we should. We also require rules such as the Ten Commandments to instruct us how to live:

> But this autonomous knowledge of good and bad is not true knowledge of good and bad; human beings on their own will not find true knowledge of how to live. This must be supplied by what is later called revelation.

I find myself agreeing with his initial statements and disagreeing with those that follow. The commandments were not miraculously revealed to us by Moses: that story is as mythical as the story of Eden. Rather these rules were proposed on the basis of how human beings had learned to live with each other.

Original Sin

Though it is not directly discussed in the Bible, Talmudic and Christian interpretations of the disobedience of Adam and Eve led to the idea that all their descendants were afflicted with their Original Sin and that this explains our mortality and our suffering (Boyce, 2015; Greenblatt, 2017, Chapters 5 and 6; Zevit, 2013, Chapter 1). The apostle Paul wrote

> Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned (*Romans* 5: 12)

Paul proclaimed that Christ died to save us from this fate, and that belief in him can lead to eternal life. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) was the great champion of Original Sin. He argued against the teachings of an English theologian Pelagius

(354-413 CE), who proposed that human beings are not born innately sinful, but rather free to choose between good and evil:

> Day by day, hour by hour, we have to reach decisions; and in each decision, we can choose good or evil. The freedom to choose makes us like God: if we choose evil, that freedom becomes a curse; if we choose good, it becomes our greatest blessing.
>
> When Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge they were exercising their freedom of choice … Before eating the fruit they did not know the difference between good and evil; thus they did not possess the knowledge which enables human beings to exercise freedom of choice. By eating the fruit they acquired this knowledge, and from that moment onwards they were free. Thus the story of their banishment from Eden is in truth the story of how the human race gained its freedom: by eating fruit from the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve became mature human beings, responsible to God for their actions. (both quotations from Pelagius are in Boyce, 2015, p 15)

The story of Eden can thus be interpreted as Adam and Eve deciding not to remain in blissful innocence. They could have stayed in the garden, obeyed Yahweh's commandment and led a life of simplicity and comfort. Instead, by eating of the tree of knowledge they gained insight into the complexities of a life independent of Yahweh's care, a life wherein they made their own decisions rather than just accepting what Yahweh commanded. Their act of disobedience was an assertion of their freedom.

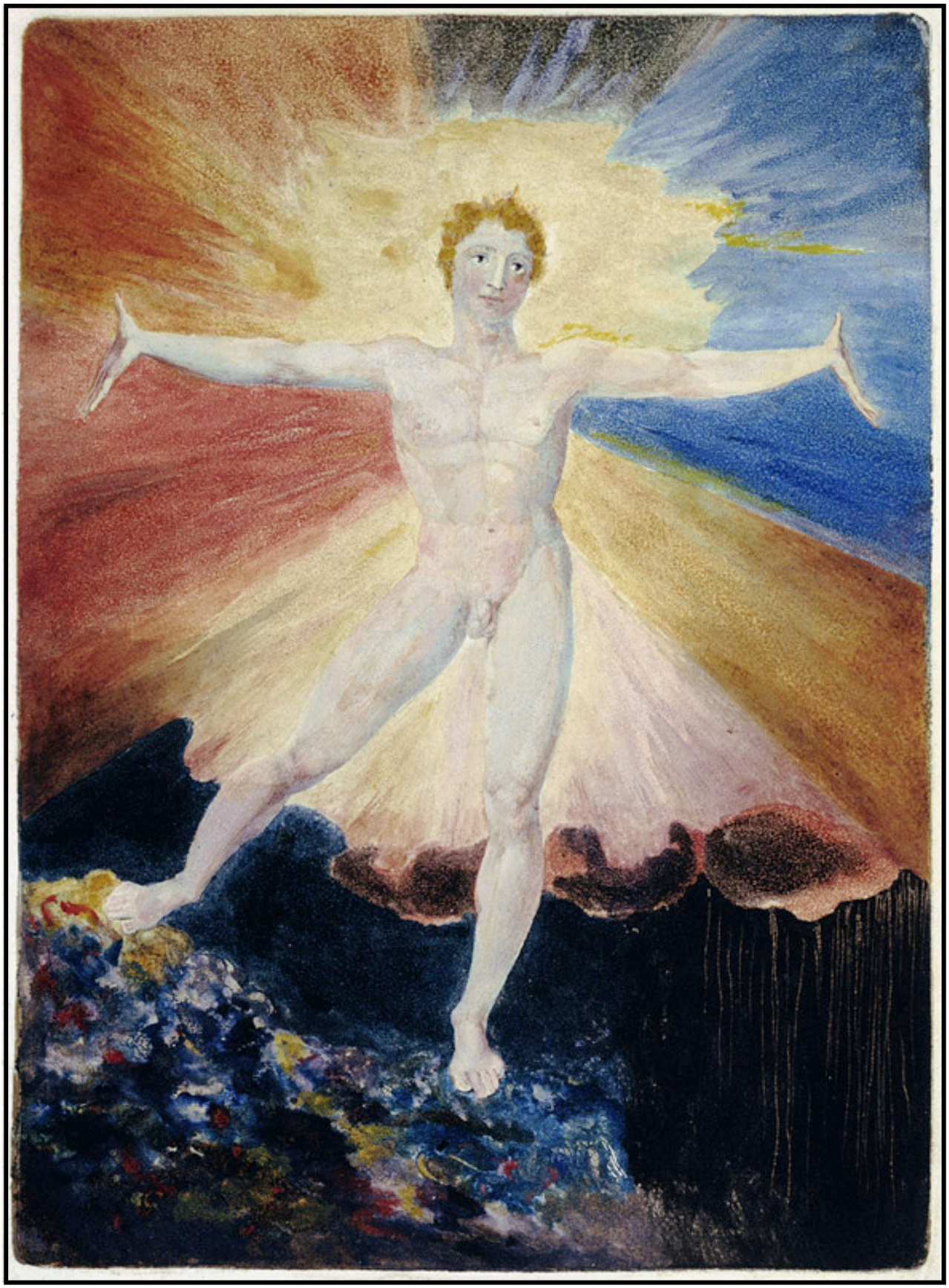
However, Augustine prevailed over Pelagius. At the Synod of Carthage (418CE), Original Sin became one of the essential doctrines of the Christian Church (Denzinger, 2012, p 223). This was unfortunate. Thinking of humanity as being free to choose, as being able to learn to do what is good, is far more

productive than simply considering humanity as doomed to die.

Freedom to Choose

The story of Adam and Eve is not a realistic story of human origins. However, myths often contain true ideas about human nature. During our evolution, human beings gained a special kind of knowledge. We became conscious of ourselves as beings able to decide freely among possible actions on the basis of the good or evil these actions might entail. We also learned that with freedom comes responsibility. We must not act just for our own good for also for the good of others.

On this note I would like to conclude with a third image from the work of William Blake: *Rose Albion* (1795). We do not know exactly what Blake was depicting. A common interpretation is that the image represents man (or more specifically, England) freed from the shackles of materialism. It might also represent the more general idea of humanity as free to choose.



References

Alter, Robert. (2004). *The five books of Moses: a translation with commentary*. W.W. Norton & Co.

Arnold, B. T. (2009). *Genesis*. Cambridge University Press (The New Cambridge Bible Commentary).

Boyce, J. (2015). *Born bad: original sin and the making of the Western world*. Counterpoint Press.

Denzinger, H. (2012). *Compendium of creeds, definitions, and declarations on matters of faith and morals* (P. Hünermann, H. Hoping, R. L. Fastiggi, & A. E. Nash, Eds.; 43rd ed.). Ignatius Press.

Greenblatt, S. (2017). *The rise and fall of Adam and Eve*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Hartmann, N. (1932, reprinted 2002) *Moral Phenomena*. Transaction Publishers.

Kass, Leon. (2003). *The beginning of wisdom: reading Genesis*. Free Press.

Laird, J. (2014). *A study in moral theory*. Routledge.

Makowiecki, M. (2021). Untangled branches: the Edenic tree(s) and the multivocal WAW. *Journal of Theological Studies*, *71*(2), 441–457.

Robinson, M. (2024). *Reading Genesis*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Rosenberg, J., & Bloom, H. (1990). *The book of J*. Grove Weidenfeld.

Speiser, E. A. (1964). *Genesis: introduction, translation, and notes*. Doubleday (Anchor Bible).

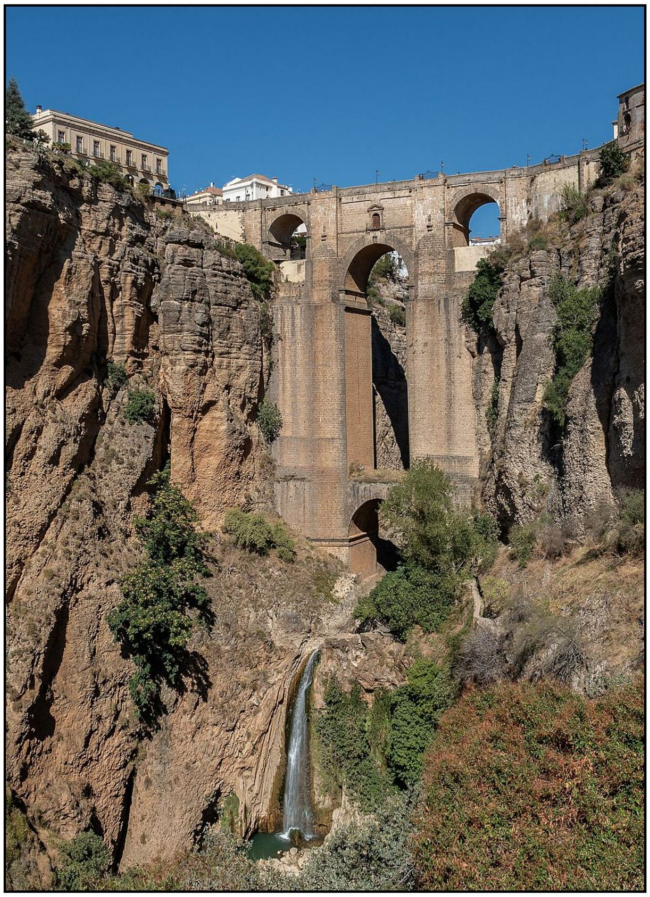
Zevit, Z. (2013). *What really happened in the Garden of Eden?* Yale University Press.

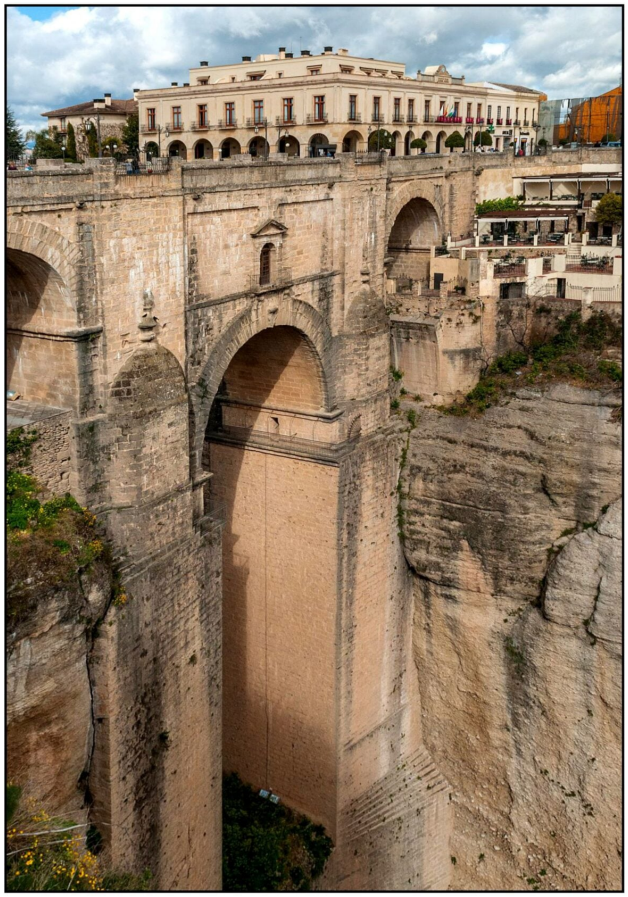
History, Myth and Fiction

This post describes some of the events that occurred in Ronda, a town in southern Spain, during the summer of 1936. After the Spanish Civil War broke out, Anarchists quickly took control of the town, and murdered many supporters of the Nationalist cause. Two months later, advancing Nationalist forces captured Ronda, and drove most of its people from their homes. Those that refused to leave suffered bloody reprisals. These events quickly became mythic rather than historic. In one story, the Anarchists had murdered the town's Falangists by having them beaten to death in the town's plaza and then thrown into the canyon that cuts through the center of the town. Ernest Hemingway recounted this version in his 1940 novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. However, most historians now agree that this never happened.

Ronda

Ronda is one of the most beautiful of the *pueblos blancos* ("white towns") perched on the inland hills of Andalusia. The name comes from the buildings that were white-washed to protect them from the heat of the sun. Through the center of Ronda runs the Guadalevin River, which has carved through the limestone cliffs a steep-walled canyon, *el tajo*, reaching depths of more than 100 meters. The most striking bridge over the river is the *Puente Nuevo* constructed in 1793 at the point where the canyon opens into the huge valley know as *la caldera* (cauldron) The following illustration shows the bridge viewed from the West (left) and from the Southeast (right).





The large building just to the north of the bridge used to be Ronda's *casa consistorial* (town hall) where the *ayuntamiento* or local council met. In the 1990s this was converted into a *parador* (state-owned luxury hotel). The following illustration shows the old city hall with its arcades facing the large town square. On the far left can be seen a low wall looking over the canyon.

Ronda has many other luxury hotels. The Hotel Reina Victoria, a summer resort for the English stationed in Gibraltar, was built on the cliff overlooking *la caldera* in 1906. The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke stayed there for several months in the winter of 1912-1913. The gardens beside the hotel have a commemorative statue of Rilke gazing out over valley (shown below in a photograph by Bryan Appleyard).

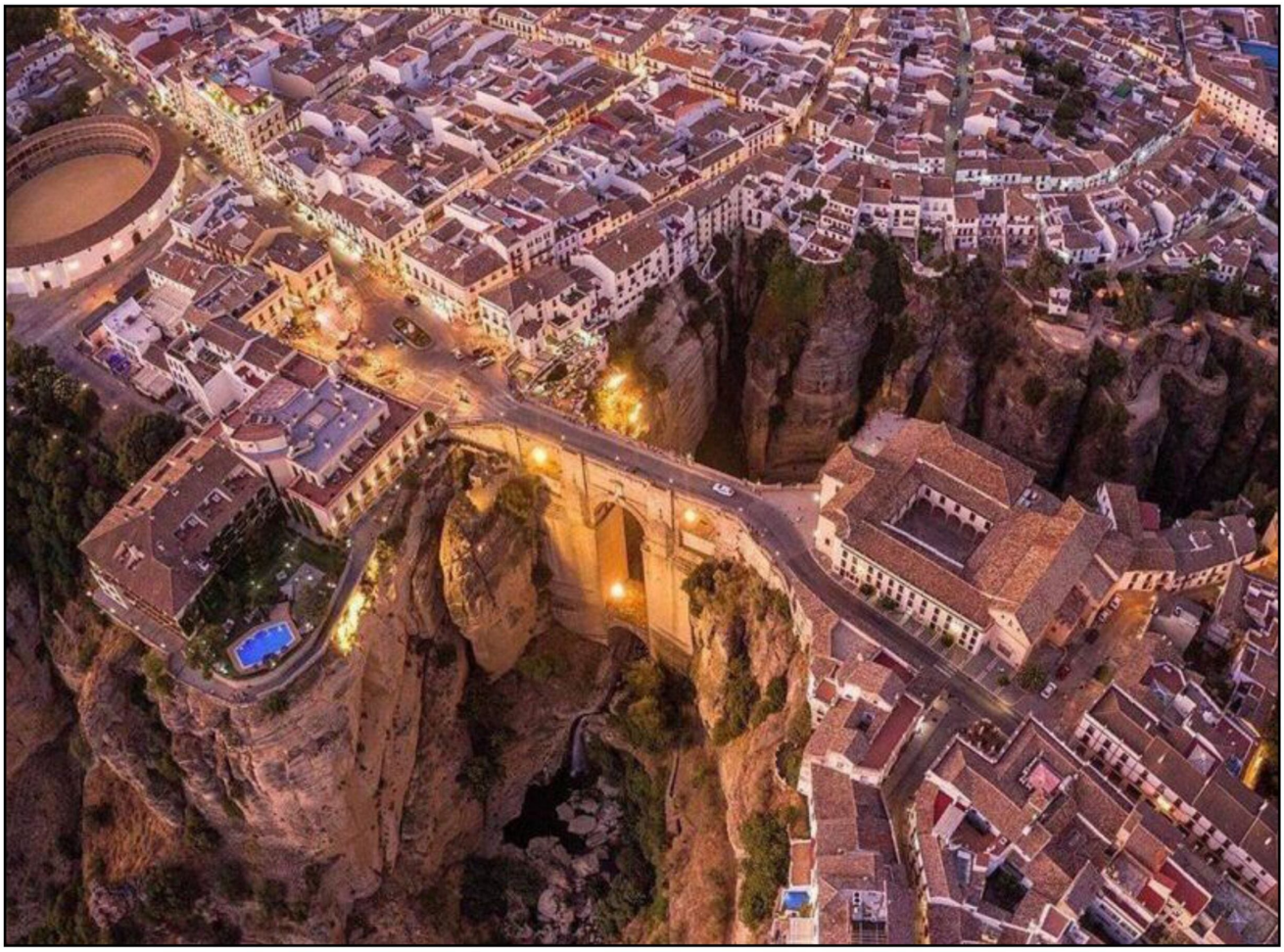
In Ronda, Rilke continued working on a set of poems that would not be complete until ten more years had passed – the *Duino Elegies*. He was also able to compose several poems about Spain. In the third part of a poem called *The Spanish Trilogy* he praised the peasants he could see in the valley, hoping that he might become as attuned to the universe as a simple shepherd:

> Langsamen Schrittes, nicht leicht, nachdenklichen Körpers,
> aber im Stehn ist er herrlich. Noch immer dürfte ein Gott
> heimlich in diese Gestalt und würde nicht minder.
> Abwechselnd weilt er und zieht, wie selber der Tag,
> und Schatten der Wolken
> durchgehn ihn, als dächte der Raum
> langsam Gedanken für ihn.
>
> slow stepping, not light-footed, his body lost in

thought,
but splendid when he stands still. A God might
secretly take his form and not be any the lesser.
By turns he tarries and continues on like the day itself
and the shadows of the clouds
pass through him, as if the vast space
were thinking slow thoughts for him.
(translation Paul Archer)

The poetry is beautiful. However, one cannot help but wonder about how shepherd felt looking up toward the hotel on the cliff. And whether this young shepherd would participate in the revolution some twenty years later.

As well as the canyon and its bridge, Ronda is famous for its *plaza de toros* (bullring) which was built in 1785. The bullring is seen in the upper left of the aerial view of Ronda in the following illustration:



Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) first visited Ronda in 1923 and became enamored of its site and of the bullfights (Buckley, 1997). In his 1932 book on the traditions of bullfighting, *Death in the Afternoon*, he remarked

> There is one town that would be better than Aranjuez to see your first bullfight in if you are only going to see one and that is Ronda.

Hemingway visited Spain during the Civil War, although at that time he could not visit Ronda, which was controlled by the Nationalists. He returned to Ronda many times in the 1950s. For the bullfights, and for the memories.

The Spanish Civil War

In 1931, the Spanish king was deposed and a new government was proclaimed: the Second Spanish Republic, the first having lasted for less than two years (1873-1874) before being aborted by a military coup. The governing coalition of the Second Republic was composed of many separate and feuding parties, among them Anarchists, Communists, Republicans and Catalonian Separatists. The right-wing opposition contained parties favoring the Monarchy or the Catholic Church. The Falangist party, a fascist organization was founded in 1933 in response to the new republic.

The government had to deal with multiple problems

- much of the land was owned by the aristocrats, who managed large tracts of land (*latifundia*), and who treated the peasants as slaves
- the military was far larger and more powerful than necessary for a country that had long ago lost its empire
- the church sided with the generals and the aristocrats, for they were the source of their power and wealth
- the new industries, run by a small number of capitalists, exploited the workers who made the factories run, and who were organizing into unions
- the police force – the *Guardia Civil* – mainly existed to support the landed aristocrats and the capitalists.

The course of the Second Republic was extremely turbulent. The government reduced funds for the military, and closed down the military academy in Zaragoza, run by General Franciso Franco. Strikes occurred and these were put down with excessive force. Attempts to take land away from the *latifundista* were unsuccessful. The government tried to restrict the role of the church in the educational system. Many of the poor, urged on by anarchists and communists, attacked the church. In 1933, Pope Pius XI published an encyclical *Dilectissima Nobis* ("Dear to us") specifically deploring the anti-clerical violence in Spain.

In the election of January,1936, the left-wing parties in the Popular Front won a majority against a coalition of the right-wing parties named the National Front. Many have suggested that the election was rigged to some extent, and the voting was followed by much violence. Manuel Azana Diaz (1880-1940), who had served in various positions in the preceding government, became the president of the newly elected Republican government.

In July 1936, General Emilio Mola, supported by General Franciso Franco, called for a coup to end the republic and to return the nation to its previous form. The leftist parties reacted by calling for a Revolution of the workers. The country descended into anarchy. The Nationalists (or Rebels) were able to take control the north of the country, but the Republicans (or Loyalists) held off the coup in the south and in the major cities. The Civil War had begun (Thomas, 1961; Graham, 2005: Payne, 2012).

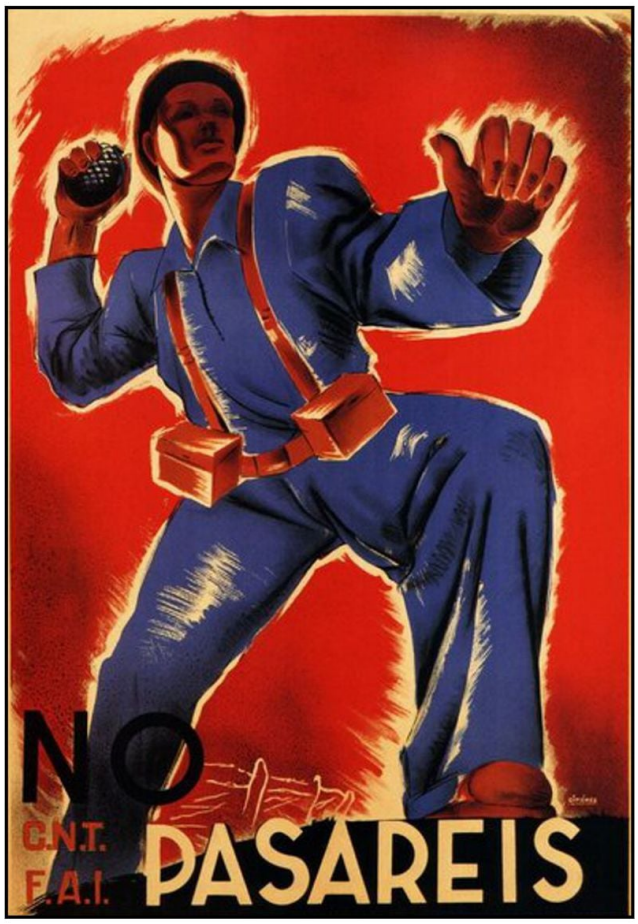
The governments of Germany and Italy immediately provided assistance to the Nationalists, and Russia came in on the side of the Republicans. England and France decided that they should not intervene in the internal politics of Spain. However, volunteers from these and many other countries (even Germany and Italy) began to organize the International Brigades to fight with the Republicans: among them were the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the United States and the Mackenzie-Papineau Brigade from Canada.

Soon after the coup was declared, Franco borrowed planes from Italy and Germany and transported troops from North Africa to shore up the Nationalists in Seville, a Catholic stronghold. The regions of the country controlled by the Nationalists (blue) and the Republicans (white) in July, 1936) are shown in the following map (derived from Preston, 2012, p 658):

From Seville, General Franco sent troops northward to join up with the Nationalists besieging Madrid. Another key point in the fighting was near Teruel, where Nationalist soldiers were attempting to advance to the sea to cut off Barcelona from Madrid. Franco also sent troops eastward to relieve the city of Granada.

Mola died in a plane crash in June of 1937, and General Franciso Franco Bahamonde (1892-1975) became the supreme leader (*el caudillo*) of the Nationalist forces. The following illustration shows the leaders of the two sides. On the left is a modernist stone statue of Manuel Azena by José Noja and Pablo Serrano that was not erected until 1979. On the right is a bronze equestrian statue of Francisco Franco by José Capuz Mamano initially cast in 1964. Various versions of this statue were erected in several of the major cities of Spain.

The following figure shows propaganda posters from both sides of the civil war. On the left is a poster stating "*No Pasareis*" (You shall not pass). This slogan and its variant "*No Pasaran*" (They shall not pass) was used by the Republicans throughout the war. The Communist politician Dolores Ibarruri Gomez (also known as *La Pasionara* – the passionate one) used the latter version in a famous speech urging on the defenders of Madrid in November 1936. The Republican poster comes from the two parties that were the mainstay of the Popular Front: the CNT (*Confederacion Nacional de Trabajo*) and the FAI (*Federacion Anarquista Iberica*). The right poster is from the Falangists. In the background are the four red arrows held together by a yoke, the Spanish version of the *fasces* (bundle of rods) of the Italian Fascists. Superimposed is a hand on a rifle. The call is "To arms – Homeland, Bread and Justice."



Events in Ronda during 1936ca)

Soon after the military coup was declared in July, 1936, members of the CNT took control in Ronda and many of the small towns in Andalusia. Members of the *Guardia Civil* and many local Nationalist leaders were executed. Similar outbreaks of violence occurred in many regions of Spain. This “red terror” was not condoned by the Republican Government, which had difficulty controlling its many factions.

Once the Nationalists had shored up control of Seville, Franco placed the bloodthirsty General Queipo de Llano in command of retaking Southern Spain. After Granada was relieved, the Nationalists returned to the other cities of Andalusia. Reaching Ronda in September, 1936 they quickly subdued the town, and took bloody revenge. Those killed by the Nationalists far outnumbered those who had been murdered in the summer (Preston, 2012).

Exactly what had happened in Ronda during these early months of the war was not clear. The Nationalists declared that the anarchists had murdered several hundred people and thrown them over the cliff. This claim was used to justify their reprisals.

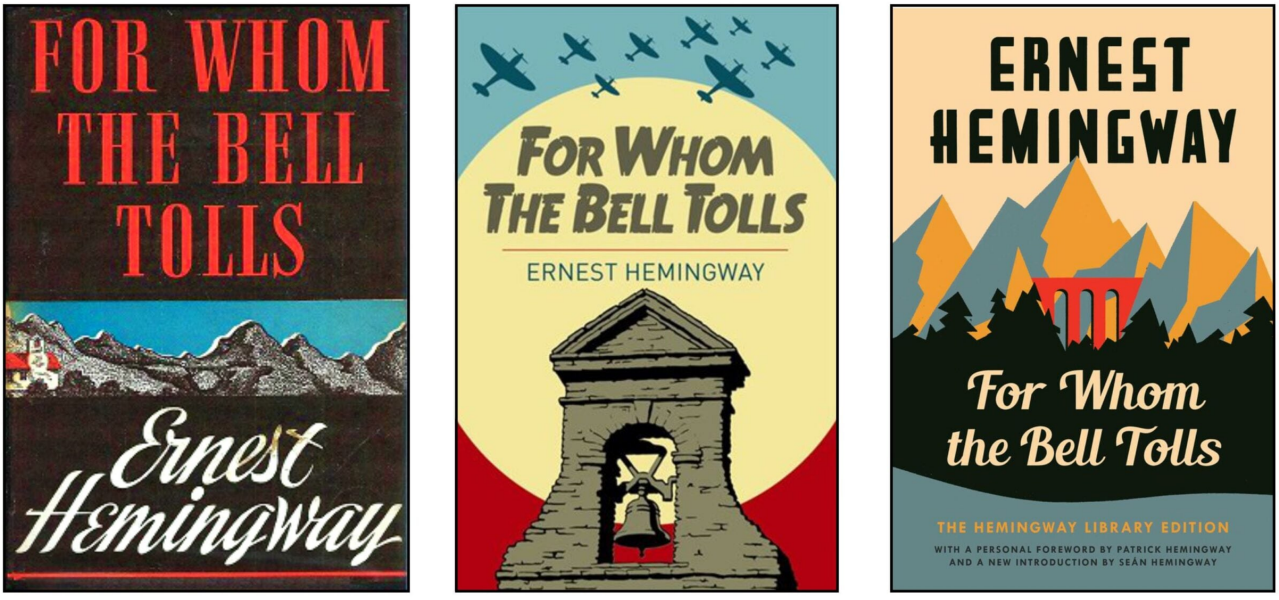
Many of the townspeople left Ronda and fled to Malaga, but this city soon fell to the Nationalists in February 1937. Republicans in Malaga were rounded up and shot. The Nationalists boasted that they executed more Republicans in seven days than the Republicans had killed in the seven months they were in control of the city (Preston, 2012, p 177).

Most of the citizens of Malaga, together with a few surviving Republican soldiers, then tried to reach Almeria along the coastal road – walking, riding donkeys and hanging onto rickety vehicles for a distance of about 200 km. These refugees were strafed and bombed by planes, and shelled by Nationalists warships. The number of people killed in what became known as the Malaga-Almeria Massacre was over 3000. The Canadian physician Norman Bethune used the few vehicles available to him to help the refugees travel to Almeria (Stewart, R., & Majada Neila, 2014), but this had little effect. The following photograph shows the refugees:

For Whom the Bell Tolls

Ernest Hemingway came to Spain toward the end of 1937 to produce a documentary film on the Civil War – *The Spanish Earth* – to help raise money for the Republicans. The photograph below shows him in the Republican trenches at Teruel (low center) together with the filmmaker Joris Ivens (high center).

After the Spanish Civil War ended in1939, Hemingway wrote *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), a novel based on what he had heard about the violence perpetrated by both sides during the conflict. The following illustration shows some of the covers used by various editions of the book, the original on the left:



The epigraph to the novel is from John Donne's *Meditations*

upon Emergent Occasions (1624) The quotation ends with:

> any mans *death* diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankinde*; And therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for *thee*.

The novel's central character is Robert Jordan, an American Professor of Spanish, and an explosives expert, now a volunteer serving with the Republicans. In the spring of 1937, he is ordered to blow up a mountain-bridge to prevent Nationalist forces from Segovia from reaching Madrid. For this task he recruits the help of a band of Republican guerillas, led by Pablo and his woman Pilar. Jordan falls in love with Maria, a beautiful young woman serving as the band's cook. Maria's father, the Republican mayor of Valladolid, and her mother had been executed by the Nationalists early in the war. She herself had her head shaved, and was raped and imprisoned, before finally escaping to the mountains.

One evening, Pilar tells Jordan and Maria what had happened in Ronda at the beginning of the war. Pablo, the leader of the local anarchists in the town, had captured the barracks of the *Guardia Civil* and executed all the guards. He had also rounded up the main supporters of the Nationalists and imprisoned them in the city council. Pilar describes the center of the town (see preceding illustrations):

> The town is built on the high bank above the river and there is a square there with a fountain and there are benches and there are big trees that give a shade for the benches. The balconies of the houses look out on the plaza. Six streets enter on the plaza and there is an arcade from the houses that goes around the plaza so that one can walk in the shade of the arcade when the sun is hot. On three sides of the plaza is the arcade and on the fourth side is the walk shaded by the trees beside the edge of the cliff with, far below, the river. It is three hundred feet down to the

river.

Pilar then describes how the town square was set up for the execution of the fascists:

> Pablo organized it all as he did the attack on the barracks. First he had the entrances to the streets blocked off with carts though to organize the plaza for a *capea*. For an amateur bull fight. The fascists were all held in the *Ayuntamiento*, the city hall, which was the largest building on one side of the plaza. It was there the clock was set in the wall and it was in the buildings under the arcade that the club of the fascists was.

Pablo organized the peasants and workers who had gathered in the square:

> He placed them in two lines as you would place men for a rope pulling contest, or as they stand in a city to watch the ending of a bicycle road race with just room for the cyclists to pass between, or as men stood to allow the passage of a holy image in a procession. Two meters was left between the lines and they ex-tended from the door of the *Avuntamiento* clear across the plaza to the edge of the cliff. So that, from the doorway of the *Ayuntamiento*, looking across the plaza, one coming out would see two solid lines of people waiting.
>
> They were armed with flails such as are used to beat out the grain and they were a good flail's length apart. All did not have flails, as enough flails could not be obtained. But most had flails obtained from the store of Don Guillermo Martin, who was a fascist and sold all sorts of agricultural implements. And those who did not have flails had heavy herdsman's clubs, or ox-goads, and some had wooden pitchforks; those with wooden tines that are used to fork the chaff and straw into the air after the flailing. Some had sickles and reaping hooks but these Pablo placed at the far end where the lines reached the edge of the cliff.

The assembled crowd was told that they must kill the fascists by beating them to death. One of the peasants asked Pilar why, and she reported the following exchange:

> “To save bullets” I said. “And that each man should have his share in the responsibility”
> “That it should start then. That it should start.” And I looked at him and saw that he was crying. “Why are you crying, Joaquin?” I asked him. “This is not to cry about.”
> “I cannot help it, Pilar,” he said. “I have never killed any one.”

One by one, the fascists were led out of the city hall and made their way through the crowd of peasants. One by one, they were beaten and clubbed to death. And one by one, their bodies were cast over the edge of the cliff into *el tajo*.

This fictional representation of the Anarchist terror in Ronda is extremely powerful. In the novel Hemingway also describes Nationalist atrocities in Valladolid – the summary execution of Maria’s parents and her abuse and rape by the Falangists. This vivid portrayal of the brutality of the war should make us rethink our hatreds. We are all in this life together; we are diminished by the death of any man; the bell tolls for us.

Later in the novel, Jordan and the guerilla band succeed in blowing up the bridge. but Jordan is severely wounded and unable to move. He convinces that the rest of the band to retreat while he stays to delay the advancing Nationalists. He insists that Maria leave with the guerillas. The novel ends with Jordan trying to stay conscious as the soldiers come closer. Talking to himself, he claims

> And if you wait and hold them up even a little while or just get the officer that may make all the difference. One thing well done can make □

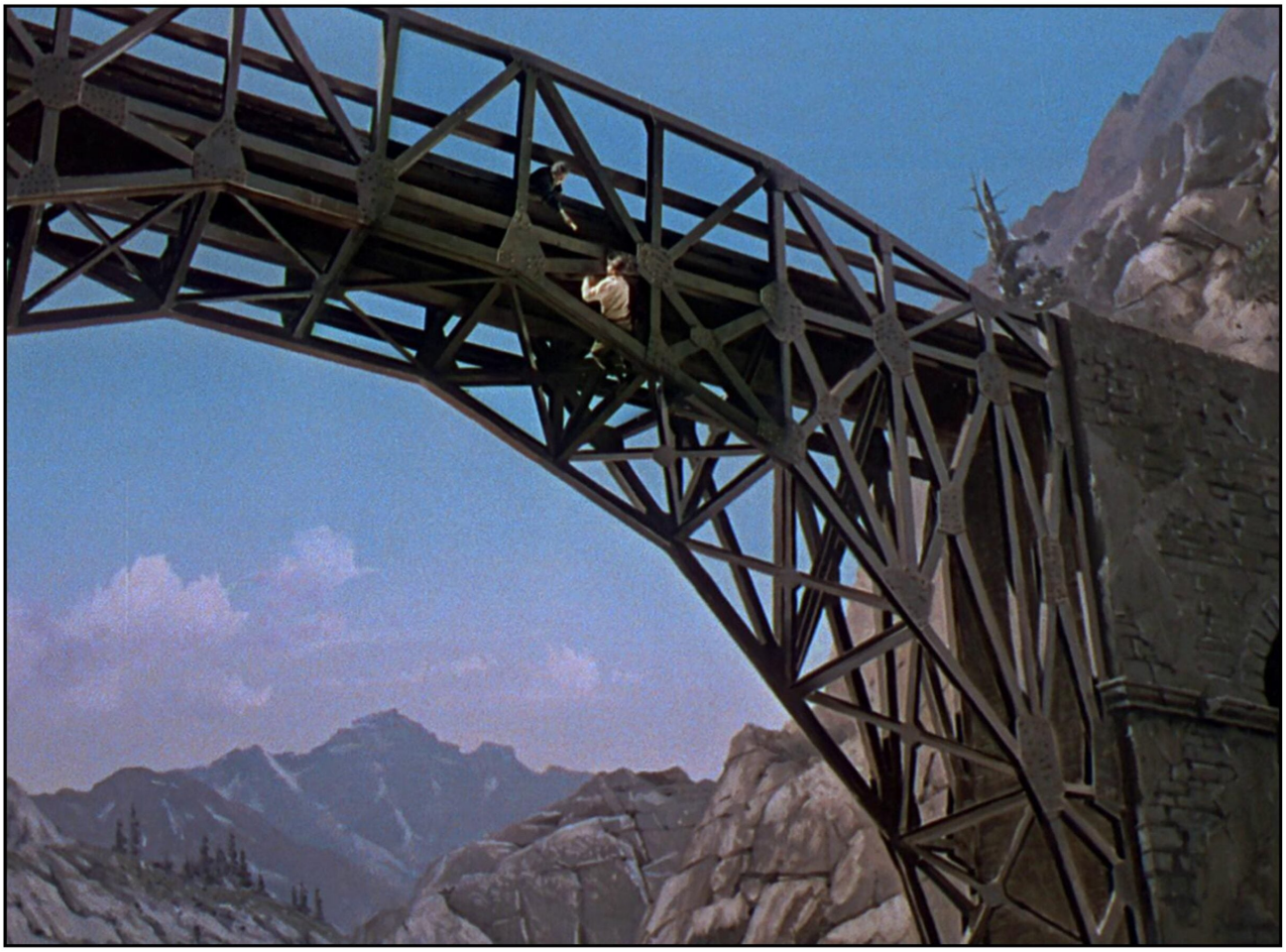
Hemingway leaves the thought unfinished. The novel ends with

an officer of the Nationalist forces riding slowly up toward where Jordan awaits him.

The book sold well, and in 1943 it was made into a film starring Gary Cooper as Jordan, Ingrid Bergman as Maria, Akim Tamiroff as Pablo and Katina Paxinou as Pilar. The film was an international success, although it was not distributed in France or Germany until after World War II (see posters below). The film received multiple nominations for the Academy Awards, with Katina Paxinou winning for best supporting actress.

The film follows the novel quite closely. When Pilar recounts her tale of what happened in Ronda at the beginning of the Civil War, the movie shows in flashback some of the brutal executions in the plaza:

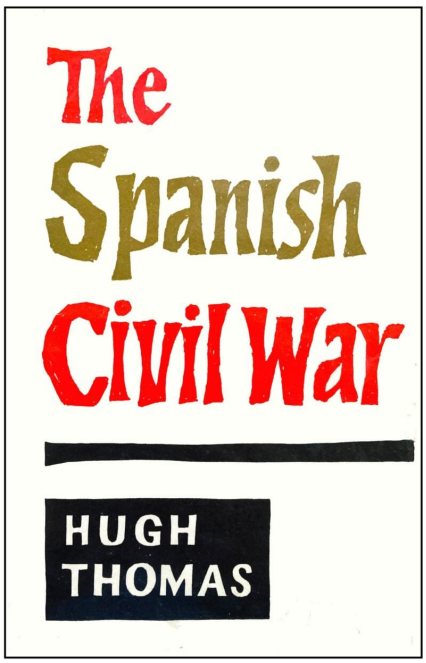
The bridge that Jordan dynamites just before the end of the movie is as high as the Puente Nuevo in Ronda:

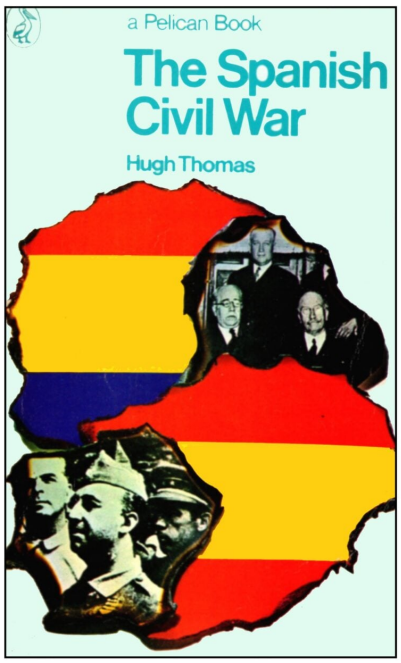


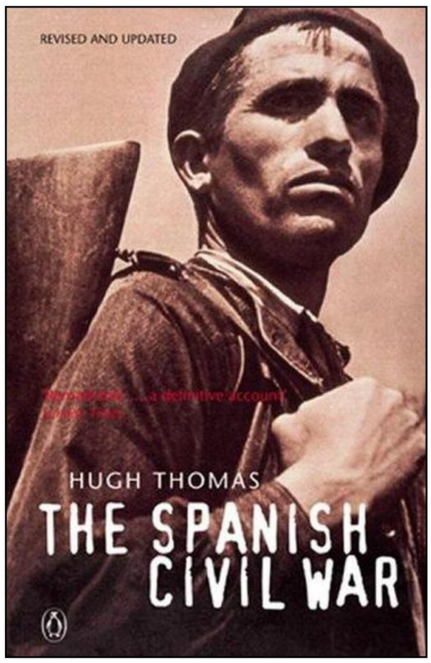
Historical Accounts of the Events in Ronda

The history of *The Spanish Civil War* (1961) by Hugh Thomas was the first major examination of what happened in Spain during

the war. The book became a best seller soon after it was published and it has since gone through two revisions and multiple printings:







Thomas discussed the events in Ronda:

> In country districts. revolution itself often consisted primarily of the murder of the upper classes or the bourgeoisie. Thus the description, in Ernest Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, of how the inhabitants of a small pueblo first beat the male members of the middle class and then flung them over a cliff, is near to the reality of what happened in the famous Andalusian town of Ronda (though the work was the responsibility of a gang from Malaga). There, 512 were murdered in the first month of war. (p 263 in 1989 printing)

Other historians have proposed that the Ronda executions described by Hemingway, although based on accounts he had heard, was completely fictional. Buckley (1997) described what happened in Ronda in the Summer of 1936, according to the records maintained in the town hall:

> On 19 July 1936 the commander of the small army garrison in

Ronda, upon reports of a military uprising in Morocco, went to the Town Hall with a small platoon and demanded that the mayor submit to his authority and publicly announce that the city was under martial law and the army was taking control. The mayor belonged to the left-wing coalition known as the Popular Front. He refused to follow the commander's orders and swiftly disarmed him and his small band of soldiers, heavily outnumbered by the peasant groups beginning to assemble on the plaza outside the town hall. Thus, Ronda remained loyal to the Republican government of Madrid, and did not fall to the fascists until 18 September 1936.

However, it would be would be wrong to assume that during these two months the Republican government in Madrid had any control over the town or its inhabitants. As soon as the reports of a military rising in Africa began to spread, the peasants from neighboring villages poured into Ronda and in effect took control. Although the mayor was nominally in charge, the real power belonged to a "Comite" formed by the peasants themselves, most of whom belonged to CNT (Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo), the Anarchist Labor Union.

The task of this committee was three-fold: first, to arrest all persons suspected of having fascist sympathies; second, to insure that food was evenly distributed to all inhabitants (money was outlawed and vouchers with the CNT rubber-stamp were issued); third, to prepare to defend Ronda from a probable attack by fascist troops stationed in Seville.

The word "revolution" immediately comes to mind when we attempt to describe the situation in Ronda in summer 1936. The Secretary's "Record of Proceedings" for 28 July 1936, preserved in Ronda's Town Hall, displays revolutionary rhetoric: "[W]e are living through a moment of historic transcendence … the fascist coup has spurred the populace to rise to the last man and to demand social justice . . . a new society is being born, based upon liberty, justice and equality … justice has now become `revolutionary justice'

> designed to cleanse the state of all fascist elements as well as to establish the basis for a new social order etc."

Many priests and supporters of the Nationalist cause were executed. However, these victims were not killed in the plaza, but were driven away from the center of the town and shot. It is difficult to determine the number of those killed, but it was likely much less than the 512 claimed by the Nationalists. None of the bodies were thrown into *el tajo*. This story seems to have been invented by General Queipo to inflame his troops as they went about their reprisals.

Corbin (1995) considers the story about the executions in the plaza and the casting of the bodies into *el tajo* as an example of myth-making. Myths have their basis in historical events but the stories become altered in the telling, often to justify the actions of those in power:

> Any story of the past has a double construction and a double truth. The truth of the tale told is its historical truth; the truth of its telling is its mythical truth.

The story of the executions by *el tajo* served the purpose of the Nationalists: it portrayed the class hatred of the anarchists and communists and the violence that they promulgated in the early weeks of the Civil War. This then justified their violent repression. Society must be protected from any recurrence of such revolutionary terror.

In *The Spanish Holocaust* (2012) which describes the repression of the Spanish Republicans during and after the Civil War, Paul Preston summarizes the events in Ronda:

> Famous for its Roman and Arab bridges and its exquisite eighteenth-century bullring, Ronda had suffered a pitiless repression at the hands of anarchists led by a character known as 'El Gitano.' Initially, the CNT committee had maintained a degree of order although churches were sacked and images destroyed, but soon there were murders being

> carried out by anarchists from Malaga and also by locals. However, there is no substance to the claim, first made by Queipo in a broadcast on 18 August and popularized by Ernest Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, that large numbers of prisoners were killed by being thrown into the *tajo*. The many rightist victims were shot in the cemetery. Francoist sources claim that victims of the red terror from Ronda and the nearby pueblos of Gaucin and Arriate numbered over six hundred. On 16 September, when Varela took the town, the defenders fled and his forces suffered only three casualties in the assault. His men stopped and interrogated anyone found in streets and shot many of them. Over half of the population fled towards Malaga. Under the new authorities, those of the town's defenders who had not fled were subjected to a bloody repression and the theft of their property. (p 171)

In the White City

The American poet, Philip Levine, spent time in Spain trying to learn more about the Spanish Civil War and the poets that wrote about it (Levine, 2016). He also wrote about Ronda in a prose-poem entitled *In the White City* (2009).

> From up there—& he points to the bridge high above us—they tossed down the fat barber, the Falangist, to his death. "It is all in the book by the American communist." "The communist?" I say. Yes, the friend of Fidel Castro, Comrade Hemingway "The tourists come because of your Mr. Hemingway, that is why you are here." Who can argue with this young, balding lieutenant of the Guardia Civil who has dared to leave his barracks lacking his tricorne & with only a small sidearm? In felt house slippers he stands at ease on the west streets of his town, Ronda, to show me the world. "On those rocks," he continues, pointing to a ledge half way down the

> gorge, “he first hits & his belly explodes. Then they rape his beautiful daughter, the film star that is Swedish, & when they have finish they shave her head. That is why we execute them all.” Does he mean that is why in the novel the Nationalists executed them. (I am careful not to say “the fascists”; it is 1965.) “No, no, executed them here, in life or death”—he smiles at his little joke—“up there on the bridge”— & he points again,— “by military firing squad one at a time, properly. That is why the whole town must witness & learn. It is educational.” But, I insist, the death of the Falangist was merely in a novel that made no effort to be true to events, *una novela*, a fiction, a best seller. The lieutenant enjoys this repartee, he’s amused by my innocence, he shakes his head, he is discreet & patient with this visitor to his ancient city that boasts the first Plaza de Toros in all the world. “You Americans,” and he suppresses his laughter, “you think because he was a famous red he could not tell the truth. They do not give Noble Prizes to liars.”

The poem illustrates how history becomes mixed up with fiction, with movies, and with photographs to form the myths that we remember about the past. Hemingway was not a communist and, though he spent time in Cuba, he was not a friend of Castro (Michaud, 2012). This idea stems from photographs of the two of them together at a fishing competition, the only time they ever met. The character Maria in Hemingway’s novel, played by the Swedish film-star in the movie, was the daughter of a mayor who was executed in the Civil War, but this was in a different town, and the mayor there was a Republican executed by the Nationalists. The poem ends with the idea that fiction written by a winner of the Noble (sic) Prize has to be true.

The following is an etching of the *Puente Nuevo* in Ronda done by Gary Young for a broadside edition of Levine's poem.

Epilogue

By the spring of 1938, the Nationalists ultimately made their way to the sea, isolating Barcelona from Madrid. After Franco's troops marched into Barcelona in January 1939, Manuel Azana was among the thousands of refugees who fled from Barcelona to France. In March, Madrid was taken and Franco declared victory on April 1, 1939, and became the Prime Minister of Spain, continuing in this office until 1973. During and after the war, many thousands of Republicans were executed by the Nationalists in a repression known as the "white terror" or the "Spanish Holocaust" (Preston, 2012).

Hemingway's novel was translated into Spanish as *Por quién doblan las campanas,* but was not allowed into Spain until 1969. The movie was not shown there until 1978. Hugh Thomas's history of the war was forbidden in Spain until after the death of Franco in 1975. Today Spain continues to unearth the bodies of those executed during and after the war, and to seek some understanding of the violence and brutality of those days (Anderson, 2017). The myths need to be converted back into history.

References

Anderson, P. (2017). Knowing and acknowledging Spain's dark Civil War past. *Journal of Contemporary History*, *52*(1), 129–139.

Buckley, R. (1997): Revolution in Ronda: the facts in Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. *Hemingway Review*, 17(1), 49-57.

Corbin, J. (1995). Truth and myth in history: an example from the Spanish Civil War. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 25(4), 609-625

Graham, H. (2005). *The Spanish Civil War: a very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Hemingway, E. (1932). *Death in the afternoon*. Scribner.

Hemingway, E. (1940). *For whom the bell tolls*. Scribner.

Levine, P. (2009). *News of the world: poems*. Alfred A. Knopf.

Levine, P. (2016). The Spanish Civil War in Poetry. In Levine, P. (edited by Hirsch E., 2016). *My lost poets: a life in poetry*. (pp 139-163). Alfred A. Knopf.

Michaud, J. (2012). Hemingway, Castro, and Cuba. *New Yorker* (May 24, 2012).

Payne, S. G. (2012). *The Spanish Civil War.* Cambridge University Press.

Preston, P. (2012). *The Spanish holocaust: inquisition and extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain*. HarperPress.

Stewart, R., & Majada Neila, J. (2014). *Bethune in Spain*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

Thomas, H. (1961, revised and enlarged, 1989). *The Spanish Civil War*. Harper & Row.

Gauguin

Gauguin

In 1891, Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) left his wife and five children and sailed for Tahiti, where he hoped

> to immerse myself in virgin nature, to see no one but savages, live their life, with no other thought in mind but to render, the way a child would, the concepts formed in my brain and to do this with the aid of nothing but the primitive means of art, the only means that are good and true (letter quoted in Eisenman, 1997, p 77).

His decision to desert his family and follow his art has been considered by philosophers as a case study in ethics. Was his hope of artistic success adequate justification for his behavior? As luck would have it, Gauguin did become a famous artist, albeit posthumously. Can this retrospectively vindicate his flight to Tahiti? These issues are complex – both in the abstract and in terms of Gauguin's actual life.

Life Before Art

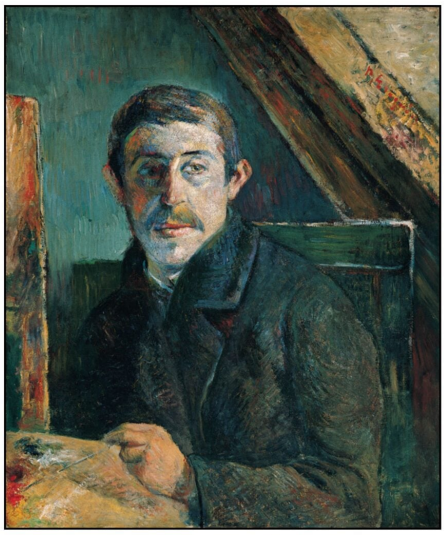
Gauguin was born in France but spent much of his childhood in Peru, where his mother's family had aristocratic connections. His grandmother Flora Tristan (1803-1844), a feminist and socialist, was the niece of Juan Pío Camilo de Tristán y Moscoso, who briefly served as president of South Peru.

Gauguin returned to France to finish his schooling and then spent three years as a merchant sailor and two years in the French Navy, during which time he travelled throughout the world. When he returned to France in 1871, Gauguin was taken in by a rich relative, Gustave Arosa, an avid collector of realist and impressionist paintings. Arosa got Gauguin a job on the stock exchange, and introduced him to Camille Pissarro.

Gauguin became a very successful broker, and took up painting as a hobby. He married a young Danish woman Mette-Sophie Gad (1850–1920), and had five children. Having made a fortune on the stock market, Gauguin became an art collector himself, buying paintings by Pissarro, Cézanne, Manet, Degas, and Sisley (Bretell & Fonsmark, 2005, p 56)

Impressionism

Gauguin had talent and he quickly learned the new Impressionist style. His paintings were included in the Impressionist Exhibitions beginning with the fifth in 1880. Below is one of his paintings from this time – *Vaugirard Market Gardens*, 1879 – together with a self-portrait from 1885.



The Stock Market Crash

In 1882 the Union Générale bank collapsed and the Paris Bourse crashed. By 1883 Gauguin was out of work. The family moved to Rouen where life was less expensive than in Paris. Gauguin decided to paint full time. However, he was not able to sell his paintings. Mette moved back to Denmark with most of the family in 1884, and Gauguin reluctantly followed in 1885. For a brief time, he was a salesman for French tarpaulins in Copenhagen, but he did not speak Danish and the endeavor came to nought. Mette supported the family by giving French lessons. Gauguin's paintings found no market among the Danes. He became depressed, and sometimes was sometimes physically violent with his wife (Mathews, 2001, p 62). Mette's family insisted that he leave.

In 1985 Gauguin returned alone to Paris. He submitted nineteen paintings to the Eighth and Final Exhibition of the Impressionist in1886, but these were not well received by either critics or buyers. Gauguin fled Paris for Pont-Aven in Brittany, an artists' colony where living was cheap. There he worked with Emile Bernard and Louis Anquetin.

Vision after the Sermon (1888)

Gauguin was fascinated by the deep religiosity of the Breton

peasants. He developed a new style of painting to portray their lives. He began using clearly outlined blocks of flat color in the manner of the Japanese prints that had become popular in Paris. He further decided that colors should be based as much upon the imagination as upon reality. This emphasis on the creative imagination derived from the Symbolist movement in literature. Gauguin named his new style of painting "Synthetism." This approach was also called "Cloisonnism" after the technique for decorating metalwork, whereby colored enamels are placed within spaces bordered by metal strips. A masterpiece of this approach was Gauguin's *The Vision after the Sermon*, which portrays Breton peasants experiencing a vision of Jacob wrestling with the angel after a sermon on this episode from Genesis 22: 22-32 (Herban, 1977):

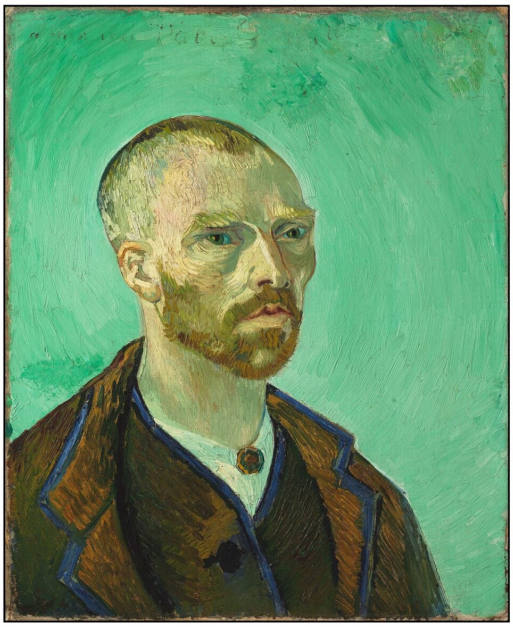
The figure at the lower right is Gauguin. The young peasant at the lower left is likely a portrait of Bernard's sister Madeleine, with whom Gauguin was infatuated. The following is a description of the painting from Vargas Llosa's novel *The Way to Paradise*. Vargas Llosa used the second person narrative as though someone is talking to Gauguin (or Gauguin is talking to himself). "Koké" was the name that the Tahitians called him – their best approximation of his name:

> The true miracle of the painting wasn't the apparition of biblical characters in real life, Paul, or in the minds of those humble peasants. It was the insolent colors, daringly antinaturalist: the vermillion of the earth, the bottle green of Jacob's clothing, the ultramarine blue of the angel, the Prussian black of the women's garments and the pink-, green- and blue-tinted white of the great row of caps and collars interposed between the spectator, the apple tree, and the grappling pair. What was miraculous was the weightlessness reigning at the center of the painting, the space in which the tree, the cow, and the fervent women seemed to levitate under the spell of their faith. The miracle was that you had managed to vanquish prosaic realism by creating a new reality on the canvas, where the objective and the subjective, the real and the supernatural, were mingled, indivisible. Well done, Paul! Your first masterpiece, Koké! (Vargas Llosa, 2003, pp 217-218)

Gauguin also created a striking version of the crucifixion based on his time in Pont-Aven – *The Yellow Christ* (1889):

The Studio of the South

Back in Paris, Gauguin met the dealer Theo van Gogh and through him his brother Vincent. The two artists exchanged self-portraits. Van Gogh’s saw himself as an austere Japanese monk; Gauguin’s portrait is off-center against a floral wallpaper background includes a portrait of Emile Bernard:



Vincent invited Gauguin to stay with him in Arles in Provence. For nine weeks in late 1888 the two artists lived and worked together (Silverman, 2000; Druick et al, 2001). Although their relations were initially amicable, they disagreed on many things and the tension between them increased. If we are to believe what Gauguin later recalled in his journals (Gauguin, 2009, pp 12-14), one evening van Gogh threatened Gauguin with a razor and Gauguin decamped to stay the night in a hotel. Van Gogh then proceeded to cut off his right ear with the razor and presented the ear to one of the prostitutes in Arles. Gauguin fled to Paris and van Gogh was confined to an asylum.

Manao Tupapau

Van Gogh and Gauguin had discussed the book *Rarahu* by Pierre Loti (1880), which described the author's marriage to a Tahitian girl, and the two artists considered the possibility of painting in the islands of the Pacific. Van Gogh committed suicide in 1890. Gauguin sailed to Tahiti in 1891.

In Tahiti Gauguin took a Tahitian girl aged thirteen, Tehemana (Tehura), as his mistress. One night when returning home late to his hut, he found her lying frightened on the bed:

> Quickly, I struck a match, and I saw. . . . Tehura, immobile, naked, lying face downward flat on the bed with the eyes inordinately large with fear. She looked at me, and seemed not to recognize me. As for myself I stood for some moments strangely uncertain. A contagion emanated from the terror of Tehura. I had the illusion that a phosphorescent light was streaming from her staring eyes. Never had I seen her so beautiful, so tremulously beautiful. And then in this half-light which was surely peopled for her with dangerous apparitions and terrifying suggestions, I was afraid to make any movement which might increase the child's paroxysm of fright. How could I know what at that moment I might seem to her? Might she not with my frightened face take me for one of the demons and specters, one of the Tupapaus, with which the legends of her race people sleepless nights? Did I really know who in truth she was herself? The intensity of fright which had dominated her as the result of the physical and moral power of her superstitions had transformed her into a strange being, entirely different from anything I had known heretofore. (Gauguin, 1919/85, pp 33-34)

In Tahitian legends the Tupapaus were malignant demons. Over the next few days Gauguin painted the scene that he had witnessed, calling it *Manao Tupapau*, "Spirit of the Dead Watching" (1892):

Vargas Llosa imagines his thoughts about the painting:

> Yes, this was truly the painting of a savage. He regarded it with satisfaction when it seemed to him that it was finished. In him, as in the savage mind, the everyday and the fantastic were united in a single reality, somber, forbidding, infused with religiosity and desire, life and death. The lower half of the painting was objective, realist; the upper half subjective and unreal but no less authentic. The naked girl would be obscene without the fear in her eyes and the incipient downturn of her mouth. But fear didn't diminish her beauty. It augmented it, tightening her buttocks in such an insinuating way, making them an altar of human flesh on which to celebrate a barbaric ceremony, in homage to a cruel and pagan god. And in the upper part of the canvas was the ghost, which was really

> more yours than Tahitian, Koké. It bore no resemblance to those demons with claws and dragon teeth that Moerenhout described. It was an old woman in a hooded cloak, like the crones of Brittany forever fixed in your memory, time-less women who, when you lived in Pont-Aven or Le Pouldu, you would meet on the streets of Finistère. They seemed half dead already, ghosts in life. If a statistical analysis were deemed necessary, the items belonging to the objective world were these: the mattress, jet-black like the girl's hair; the yellow flowers; the greenish sheets of pounded bark; the pale green cushion; and the pink cushion, whose tint seemed to have been transferred to the girl's upper lip. This order of reality was counterbalanced by the painting's upper half: there the floating flowers were sparks, gleams, featherlight phosphorescent meteors aloft in a bluish mauve sky in which the colored brushstrokes suggested a cascade of pointed leaves. The ghost, in profile and very quiet, leaned against a cylindrical post, a totem of delicately colored abstract forms, reddish and glassy blue in tone. This upper half was a mutable, shifting, elusive substance, seeming as if it might evaporate at any minute. From up close, the ghost had a straight nose, swollen lips, and the large fixed eye of a parrot. You had managed to give the whole a flawless harmony, Koké. Funereal music emanated from it, and light shone from the greenish-yellow of the sheet and the orange-tinted yellow of the flowers. (Vargas Llosa, 2003, pp 22-23)

The painting is one of the most discussed of Gauguin's Tahitian pictures. The commentary is ambivalent:

> All this is to put the painting in the best possible light. But there is surely more to it than just a charming anecdote based on local folklore. In blunt terms what we actually see is the interior of a hut at night, with a large couch, covered in a boldly flowered cloth, partially overlaid by a plain white sheet on which lies a naked girl, face down, another of the child-like, yet distinctly erotic figures who

> have appeared before in Gauguin's work – pert buttocks offered invitingly to the spectator. There is even something disturbing about the way the face is half-turned towards the viewer, or rather towards the artist, Gauguin, as if he and not the figure in the background is the spirit of which she is afraid. (Sweetman, 1995, pp 326-327).

Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?

In 1893 Gauguin returned to Paris and arranged to sell some of his Tahitian paintings. He was not happy in Paris and in 1895 he returned to Tahiti. Over the next few years, Gauguin became severely depressed. He had suffered a broken ankle in a brawl in Concarneau near Pont Aven and the fracture had never really healed. He drank excessively – partly to relieve the pain and partly to improve his mood. He had sores on his legs, perhaps related to syphilis or perhaps related to the malnutrition that accompanies alcoholism. In 1897 he attempted to commit suicide with arsenic but failed. After this he worked on his last great painting, *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* (1898):

Gauguin described his work in a letter to Daniel de Monfried:

> The canvas is 4.50 meters long and 1.70 meters high. The two upper corners are chrome yellow, with the inscription on the

> left and my signature on the right, as if it were a fresco, painted on a gold-colored wall whose corners had worn away. In the bottom right, a sleeping baby, then three seated women. Two figures dressed in purple confide their thoughts to one another; another figure, seated, and deliberately outsized de-spite the perspective, raises one arm in the air and looks with astonishment at these two people who dare to think of their destiny. A figure in the middle picks fruit. Two cats near a child. A white she-goat. The idol, both its arms mysteriously and rhythmically uplifted, seems to point to the next world. The seated figure leaning on her right hand seems to be listening to the idol; and finally an old woman close to death seems to accept, to be resigned [to her fate]; . . . at her feet, a strange white bird holding a lizard in its claw represents the futility of vain words. All this takes place by the edge of a stream in the woods. In the background, the sea, then the mountains of the neighboring island. Although there are different shades of color, the landscape constantly has a blue and Veronese green hue from one end to the other. All of the nude figures stand out from it in a bold orangey tone. If the Beaux-Arts pupils competing for the Prix de Rome were told: "The painting you have to do will be on the theme, 'Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?' " what would they do? I have finished a philosophical treatise comparing that theme with the Gospel. I think it is good. (Gauguin,1990, p. 160; original letter is illustrated in Shackelford & Frèches-Thory, 2004, p 168)

The philosophical treatise he mentioned was likely *The Catholic Church and Modern Times* (Gauguin, 1990, pp 161-173), in which Gauguin decries the hypocrisy of the modern church and urges his readers to return to a more natural theology. His painting is a testament to these ideas.

In a letter to Charles Morrice (Goddard, 2029, p 48) Gauguin describes his painting as proceeding from right to left, with

the answer to “Where do we come from?” on the right, the answer to “What are we?” in the center and the answer to “Where are we going?” on the left. Nevertheless, the painting has no simple interpretation (Shackelford & Frèches-Thory, 2004, pp 167-201). The man plucking fruit from a tree in the center perhaps refers to Adam in a modern version of Eden. The two women in purple may refer to the church and its interpretation of our origins. The idol on the left is the Tahitian Goddess Hina (Gauguin, 1953, pp 11-13). Hina represented the sky, moon, air, and spirit. From the union between Hina and Tefatou, God of matter and earth, came forth man. Hina wished that man might be reborn after death much like the moon returns each month. Tefatou insisted that, although that matter lasts forever, man must die.

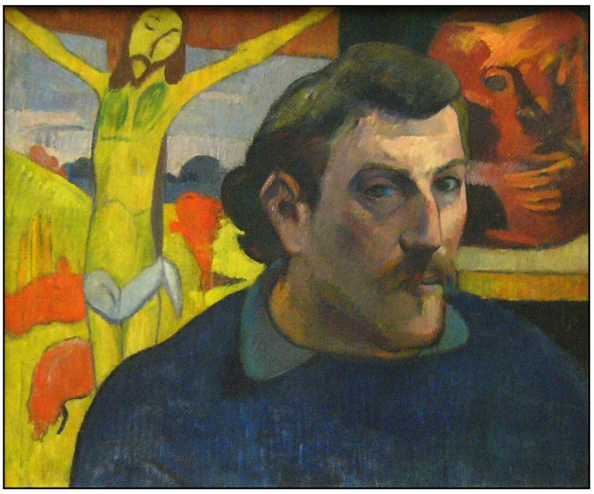
The painting stands at the cusp between earlier paintings like that of the neo-classical *Between Art and Nature* (1895) of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, which Gauguin has seen on his visit back to Paris, and the Fauvist *La Bonheur de Vivre* (1905) of Henri Matisse. Both paintings are smaller than Gauguin’s masterpiece.

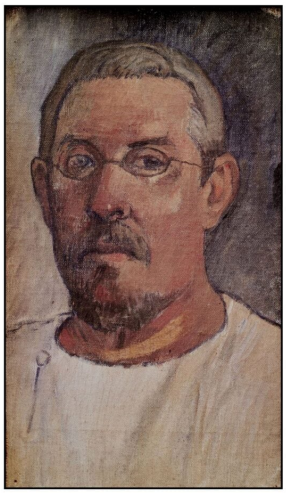
La Maison de Jouir

Gauguin decided that Tahiti was too tainted with Western civilization and decided in 1901 to move to the Marquesa Islands, about 1500 km northeast of Tahiti. There he again took a young Polynesian girl for his mistress and built himself a home that he called *La Maison de Jouir*. This is

usually translated as the “House of Pleasure” but more precisely means the “House of Orgasm.” He continued to paint and to write, and he created many striking woodcuts and drawings. One of his paintings from 1902 was the *Riders on the Beach*. The pink color of the beach is in the imagination of the artist and nowhere near reality.

In these last years, Gauguin was wracked by pain and became more and more depressed. His last *Self Portrait* (1903) from just before his death shows the ravages of alcohol and morphine. It is presented below together with two earlier portraits, one from 1889 alluding to his time in Pont-Aven, and one from 1893 referring to his first visit to Tahiti:





Acclaim

Gauguin was never recognized in his lifetime as a painter of significance. His death in 1903 warranted only a few lines in the Paris newspapers. It was not until 1906 that his friends arranged a retrospective exhibition at the Salon d'Automne in Paris. His fame has grown since then. Art historians now consider Cézanne, van Gogh and Gauguin as the "guiding lights" (Hook, 2021, p. 21) of the modernist revolution in art that occurred in the first decades of the 20th Century. This assessment is borne out by the high prices that Gauguin's paintings now command at auction.

Isabelle Cahn (in Shackelford & Frèches-Thory, 2004, pp 300-1) writes

> He was the one who had dared take all the liberties, sparking the most advanced research, particularly in the domain of color . . . Gauguin had perceived the decline of the West and revolted against the dictatorship of Greco-Roman culture. In his wake, other artists had tried to surpass the traditional boundaries of thought and, seeking regeneration, had taken an interest in primitive arts, children's drawings, folk art and outsider art. An interest in the unconscious had also opened new vistas. By giving shape to his internal world, Gauguin exposed the anxiety of

> the modern soul and its questions about its fate, leading us to edge of our own enigma, but not weighing it down with explanations.

Bretell (1988, p 396) remarks about the effects of Gauguin's work on later painters:

> Picasso was clearly devastated by the power and raw, crude strength of the printed drawings. Matisse was overcome by the color and the apparently casual draftsmanship of the late paintings. Indeed, if one can measure the strength of an artist by that of his most brilliant followers, Gauguin would be among the very greatest from the late nineteenth century.

Moral Luck

In 1976 Bernard Williams presented a paper on "Moral Luck," in which he dealt extensively with the

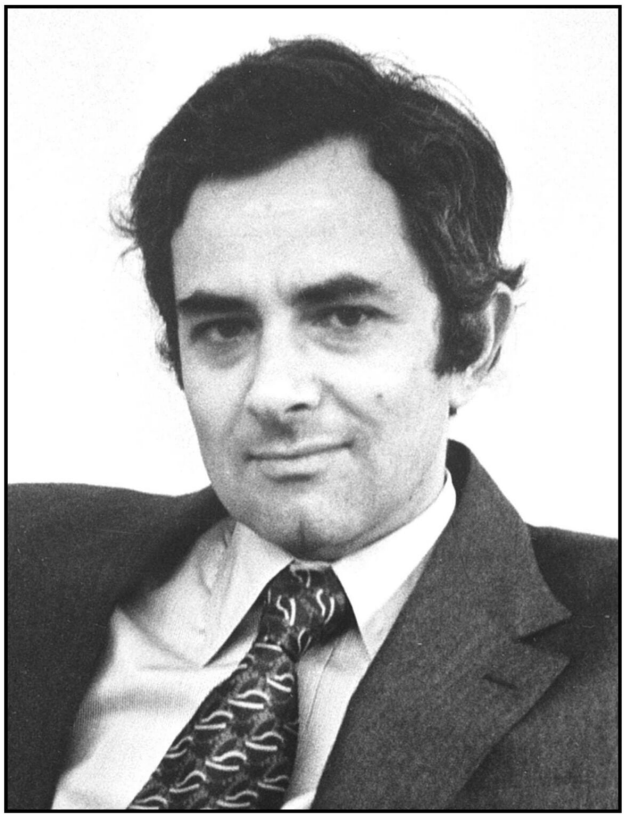
> example of the creative artist who turns away from the definite and pressing human claims on him in order to live a life in which, as he supposes, he can pursue his art.

For simplicity he calls the artist Gauguin, but he considers the case abstractly without being limited by historical facts. The main issue is that when Gauguin decided to desert his family, the only justification for his action was his hope that he would fulfil his destiny (and become a great artist), and that his art would contribute significantly to human culture. The concept of moral luck is that we cannot predict the future with any certainty. Gauguin may have died in a shipwreck before he reached Tahiti. In this event, his actions would have no justification. As chance (or "luck") would have it, Gauguin did live to paint his greatest works in Tahiti, and did contribute significantly to the history of modern art. The problem is whether such an outcome can retrospectively justify the desertion of his family. Certainly not from the point of view of his family; probably not from the point of

view of those with little interest in modern art. A secondary issue is whether aesthetic values can be used as justification for behavior that is, in itself, unethical.

Thomas Nagel commented on Williams's ideas and discussed moral luck in a more general way. Both authors thereafter updated their papers (Nagel, 1979; Williams, 1981), and there has been much further discussion in the literature (e.g., Lang, 2019; Nelkin 2019). Nagel described moral luck as that which occurs between the intention to act and the outcome of the intended action. Though we might profess, like Kant, that moral guilt or acclaim depends upon the intension (or "will") rather than the outcome, in actuality, the outcome largely determines our sense of an action's moral worth. For example, a person who drives while impaired and winds up killing a pedestrian is considered much more blameworthy than one who was similarly impaired but, as luck would have it, did not kill anyone. Moral luck points to the issue that we do not completely control the outcomes of our actions.

The following illustrations shows Williams on the left and Nagel on the right.



The Crimes of a Colonist

At the time of Gauguin's sojourn, Tahiti and the Marquesas were French colonies. The administrators of the colonies exploited the native Polynesians; the church taught them that their own culture was worthless and that they must convert to Christianity; whatever was worthwhile in their life was appropriated and made part of European culture. It was impossible for Gauguin not to be part of this process – he was a European and French Polynesia was a colony. However, he did not act in the same way as most of the Europeans. He lived with the natives, and tried to understand their language and their ideas. He was aware of the problems:

> Circumstances exposed him to the effects of recent colonization; he saw the depredation and the irrecoverable loss first-hand. He also spoke out about colonization – and thereby earned the animus of the colonial and church authorities who hounded him until the end of his life (Maleuvre, 2018).

Gauguin called the Polynesians “savages.” However, for him this was a term of praise rather than contempt. As quoted in the opening paragraph of this post, Gauguin aspired to become a savage.

Sex Tourist

Gauguin’s mistresses in Tahiti and in the Marquesas were young girls of 13 or 14 years. Although it was normal at that time for Polynesian girls of that age to have sexual relations with men, it is impossible not to deplore Gauguin’s taking advantage of them for his own sexual pleasure. Reading about these girls in his book *Noa Noa* (“Fragrance”) is terribly disconcerting:

> Indeed, it is soon clear that he is not just the average Westerner exploring for the sake of broadening his understanding of the world—he is, more than anything, a sexual tourist. Even the title *Noa Noa*, which means “fragrance,” is used by Gauguin to indicate the aroma of a human body particularly in sexual situations. Although sexual liaisons similar to those described by Gauguin were regularly reported in other contemporary travel accounts, Gauguin makes them central to the story and, in doing so, transforms the normally pedestrian Tahitian sojourn into an erotic holiday. (Mathews, 2001, p 178).

Most historians believe that the sores on Gauguin’s legs and the heart problems that led to his death were caused by advanced syphilis. However, since the discovery of the causative agent (*Treponema pallidum*) and the definitive Wassermann test did not occur until after his death, we cannot be sure. A recent examination of Gauguin’s teeth did not show evidence that he had taken the mercurial compounds that normally were used to treat the disease at that time (Mueller & Turner, 2018). Nevertheless, the prevalence of syphilis then was high – about 10% in urban populations and likely much more in those who frequented prostitutes. If Gauguin did have

syphilis, he almost certainly gave the disease to his young mistresses.

The following is from a poem Guys like Gauguin (2009) by Selina Tusitala Marsh. Louis Antoine de Bougainville was a French naval captain who explored the Pacific Ocean in the late 18th century:

> thanks Bougainville
> for desiring ’em young
> so guys like Gauguin could dream
> and dream
> then take his syphilitic body
> downstream to the tropics
> to test his artistic hypothesis
> about how the uncivilised
> ripen like pawpaw
> are best slightly raw
> delectably firm
> dangling like golden prepubescent buds
> seeding nymphomania
> for guys like Gauguin

The Artist as Monster

Gauguin as a person was not easy to like. He was concerned only with his own presumed genius. He treated his family and his mistresses egregiously. Does this mean that we should not consider his paintings – that he should be, in our modern idiom, “cancelled” (e.g., Nayeri, 2019)? Many artists have done monstrous things (Dederer, 2003), and it is often difficult to consider their art independently of their immoral lives. We should not shy away from their sins. We should not call Gauguin’s Polysnesian mistresses “young women” but clearly state that they were girls who were seduced by a sexual predator. Nevertheless, we must consider the art for its own sake. Gauguin’s paintings are powerful: they make us experience things differently.

References

Brettell, R. R. (1988). *The Art of Paul Gauguin*. National Gallery of Art.

Brettell, R. R., & Fonsmark, A.-B. (2005). *Gauguin and Impressionism*. Yale University Press.

Dederer, C. (2023). *Monsters: a fan's dilemma*. Alfred A. Knopf.

Druick, D. W., Zegers, P., Salvesen, B., Lister, K. H., & Weaver, M. C. (2001). *Van Gogh and Gauguin: the studio of the south*. Thames & Hudson.

Eisenman, S. (1997). *Gauguin's skirt*. Thames &Hudson.

Gauguin, P. (translated by O. F. Theis, 1919, reprinted 1985). *Noa Noa: the Tahitian journal*. Dover Publications.

Gauguin, P. (edited and annotated by R. Huyghe, 1951). *Ancien culte mahorie.* La Palme

Gauguin, P. (translated by E. Levieux and edited by D. Guérin, 1990). *The writings of a savage*. Paragon House.

Gauguin, P. (edited K. O'Connor, 2009) *The intimate journals*. Routledge.

Goddard, L. (2019). *Savage tales: the writings of Paul Gauguin*. Yale University Press.

Herban, M. (1977). The origin of Paul Gauguin's Vision after the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel (1888). *The Art Bulletin*, *59*(3), 415–420.

Hook, P. (2021). *Art of the extreme, 1905-1914*. Profile Books.

Lang, G. (2019). Gauguin's lucky escape: Moral luck and the morality system. In S. G. Chappell & M. van Ackeren (Eds.) *Ethics Beyond the Limits.* (pp. 129–147). Routledge.

Maleuvre, D. (2018). The trial of Paul Gauguin. *Mosaic, 51*(1), 197–213.

Marsh, S. T. (2009). *Fast talking PI*. Auckland University Press.

Mathews, N. M. (2001). *Paul Gauguin: an erotic life*. Yale University Press.

Mueller, W. A., & Turner, C. B. (2018). Gauguin's Teeth. *Anthropology*, 6: 198.

Nagel, T. (1979). Moral Luck. In *Mortal Questions*. (pp. 24–38) Cambridge University Press.

Nayeri, F. (November 18, 2019). Is it time Gauguin got canceled? *New York Times.*

Nelkin, D. N. (2019) Moral Luck. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

Silverman, D. (2000). *Van Gogh and Gauguin: the search for sacred art*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Shackleford, G. T. M., & Frèches-Thory, C. (2004). *Gauguin Tahiti: the studio of the South Seas*. Thames & Hudson.

Sweetman, D. (1995). *Paul Gauguin: a life*. Simon & Schuster.

Vargas Llosa, M. (translated by N. Wimmer, 2003). *The way to paradise*. Farrar Straus & Giroux.

Williams, B. A. O. (1981). Moral Luck. In *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980*. (pp. 20–39) Cambridge University Press.

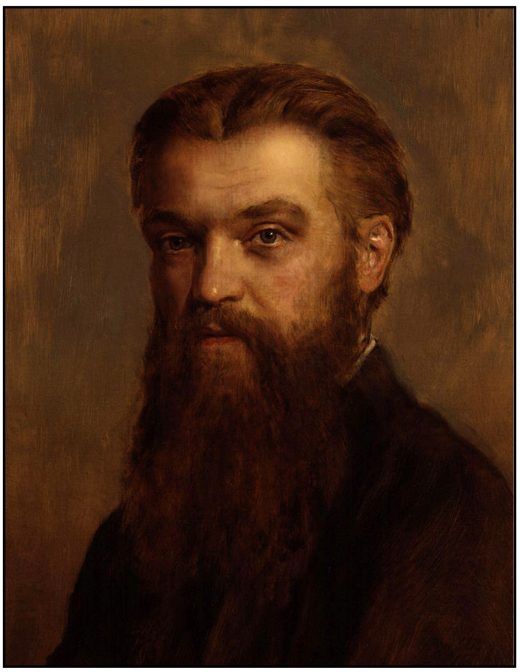
Williams, B. A. O., & Nagel, T. (1976). Moral Luck. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume, 50*(1), 115–151.

The Ethics of Belief

In the 19th-Century religious belief came under scientific scrutiny. In 1877, William Kingdon Clifford, an English mathematician and philosopher, proposed that

> it is wrong always, everywhere and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

Without good supporting evidence, one should refrain from believing: it is wrong to take anything on faith. This proposal was disputed by the American philosopher and psychologist William James in an 1896 lecture entitled *The Will to Believe*. James argued that under certain conditions we must form beliefs and act on them, even though the evidence is insufficient. The main requirements were that the believer must choose between two “genuine” possibilities, and that the choice must be sufficiently “momentous” that not choosing would entail significant risk. The latter condition hearkens back to the “wager” of Blaise Pascal, wherein a person decides what to believe based on the consequences of these beliefs rather than the evidence for them.



William Kingdon Clifford (1845-79)

William Clifford, a professor of mathematics and mechanics at the University of London, made significant contributions to algebra and to geometry, his ideas in the latter foreshadowing Einstein's *Theory of General Relativity*. He was also interested in the philosophical implications of science, publishing essays on *The Scientific Basis of Morals* and *The Ethics of Belief*.

Clifford begins the latter essay with a story about a shipwreck:

> A shipowner was about to send to sea an emigrant-ship. He knew that she was old, and not over-well built at the first; that she had seen many seas and climes, and often had needed repairs. Doubts had been suggested to him that possibly she was not seaworthy. These doubts preyed upon his mind, and made him unhappy; he thought that perhaps he ought to have her thoroughly overhauled and refitted, even though this should put him to great expense. Before the ship sailed, however, he succeeded in overcoming these melancholy reflections. He said to himself that she had gone safely

> through so many voyages and weathered so many storms that it was idle to suppose she would not come safely home from this trip also. He would put his trust in Providence, which could hardly fail to protect all these unhappy families that were leaving their fatherland to seek for better times elsewhere. He would dismiss from his mind all ungenerous suspicions about the honesty of builders and contractors. In such ways he acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy; he watched her departure with a light heart, and benevolent wishes for the success of the exiles in their strange new home that was to be; and he got his insurance-money when she went down in mid-ocean and told no tales.

Clifford insisted that the ship-owner was responsible for the deaths of all who drowned. He may have sincerely believed in the soundness of his ship, but he had no right to so believe on the basis of the evidence before him. Clifford insisted further that had the ship not foundered, its owner was still guilty. From such examples he proposed the principle ("later known as Clifford's principle") that

> it is wrong always, everywhere and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

He expounded:

> If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterward, keeps down and pushes away any doubts which arise about it in his mind, purposely avoids the reading of books and the company of men that call in question or discuss it, and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it – the life of that man is one long sin against mankind.

Chignell (2018) noted that this approach to belief is similar to that of John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690)

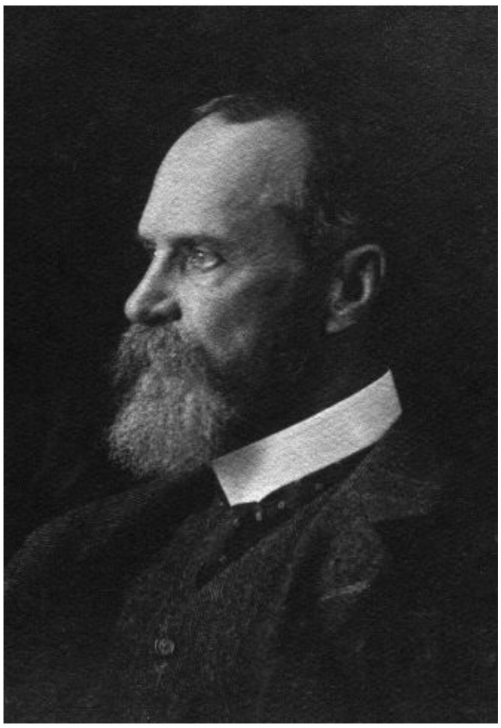
> He that believes without having any Reason for believing, may be in love with his own Fancies; but neither seeks Truth as he ought, nor pays the Obedience due to his Maker, who would have him use those discerning Faculties he has given him, to keep him out of Mistake and Error.

Clifford realized that a single person cannot sift through all the evidence for everything she needs to believe. Some beliefs must be based on the *authority* of others. However, the believer should make some rational assessment of that authority. The proposers of the beliefs must be honest; the beliefs must be such that they can be or have been verified by those who have the time and experience to verify them; their acceptance should be independent of any personal profit to those that propose the beliefs.

Clifford also considered the *limits of inference*. Most of what we know is inferred from what we and others have experienced. The fact that the sun has risen daily throughout our lives and throughout all the lives of others leads us to believe that it will continue to do so. Clifford proposed

> We may believe what goes beyond our experience, only when it is inferred from that experience by the assumption that what we do not know is like what we know.

In passing Clifford noted that we have no *a priori* right to believe that nature is universally uniform – that the future will always follow the rules of the past. This is itself a belief – one that has worked so far. Some beliefs we need to accept.



William James (1842-1910)

William James trained as a physician but never practised medicine. Rather he pursued his interests in psychology, religion, and philosophy. In each of these fields he published books that have become essential to their respective disciplines: *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), and *Pragmatism* (1907).

In a talk to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities –later published as *The Will to Believe* (1896) – James proposed that there are situations in which we should believe even when the evidence is insufficient. He describes three necessary conditions. First, the belief should involve a choice between two *live* options, i.e. ones that personally meaningful. Choosing between theosophy or Islam was likely not meaningful to his audience. Second, the choice must be *unavoidable*. Deciding to love or hate someone is easily avoidable – we can just be indifferent. However, accepting or denying the truth of a statement is unavoidable – the

statement must be either true or false. Third and most importantly, the choice must be *momentous*. James used the example of joining Nansen's expedition to the North Pole. To do so could lead to fame and glory; not to do so leaves one with nothing:

> He who refuses to embrace a unique opportunity loses the prize as surely as if he tried and failed. Per contra, the option is trivial when the opportunity is not unique, when the stake is insignificant, or when the decision is reversible if it later prove unwise.

James assumed that deciding to believe is much like deciding to act. However, choosing to believe in God is not the same as choosing to join Nansen's polar expedition. One can (and does) choose to act in certain ways. However, one does not usually choose between beliefs if there is no evidence preferring one over the other (see the criticisms of Bertrand Russell, below).

James noted that his idea of the "momentousness" of a belief is related to Pascals famous wager. Pascal proposed that it is better to believe in God than to remain an agnostic: if we are right, we are granted "eternal beatitude," and, if we are wrong, we lose nothing. James did not enjoy considering religious belief in the "language of the gaming-table." Nevertheless, he was apparently convinced by Pascal's logic. When things are that important, we must believe one way or another or risk losing all. James therefore proposed that

> Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passional decision, □ just like deciding yes or no, □ and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.

James concludes his lecture with a rousing quotation from the English Jurist, James Fitzjames Stephens (1829-1894):

> In all important transactions of life we have to take a leap in the dark…. If we decide to leave the riddles unanswered, that is a choice; if we waver in our answer, that, too, is a choice: but whatever choice we make, we make it at our peril. If a man chooses to turn his back altogether on God and the future, no one can prevent him; no one can show beyond reasonable doubt that he is mistaken. If a man thinks otherwise and acts as he thinks, I do not see that any one can prove that he is mistaken. Each must act as he thinks best; and if he is wrong, so much the worse for him. We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? Be strong and of a good courage. Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes. . . .

The image is wildly romantic. It brings to mind Casper David

Friedreich's *Wanderer over a Sea of Fog* (1812). The concept of the "leap of faith" – the act of believing something despite the lack of convincing evidence – was commonly used in the 19th Century to counter the objections of religious skeptics. The term is often attributed to Kierkegaard though he never used it (McKinnon, 1983).

James had used the image of the Alpine Climber in an earlier essay written in French on the "subjective method" (1877, discussed in Wernham, 1987, Chapter 2):

> I find myself in a difficult place from which I can only escape by making a bold and dangerous leap. Though I wish to make the leap, I have never done so before, and I do not know if I have the ability. Let us suppose I use the subjective method: I believe what I desire. My confidence gives me strength and makes possible something which otherwise might not have been. I leap across the space and find myself out of danger. But suppose I doubt my ability because it has never before been demonstrated in such a situation: then I waver; I hesitate; at last, weak and trembling, I am compelled to an attempt by sheer despair; I miss my goal; I fall into the abyss. (my translation).

It is not clear whether James was proclaiming a right to believe when there is insufficient evidence, or whether he was asserting a duty to believe. Most people would support a general right to believe with the proviso that the belief does not harm others. Few, however, would say that we ought to believe something even though the evidence is not convincing.

James has been criticized for indulging in wishful thinking (reviewed in Koopman, 2017). When we decide to believe without any evidence, we run the clear risk of entering a fantasy world. On the other hand, perhaps we should try out new world-views. Provided they cause no harm. Crusades are not allowed.

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)

Blaise Pascal was a French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher. He is most famous for his studies of probability, his experiments on atmospheric pressure and his proposal that beliefs might me determined based on what they entail rather than on the empirical evidence – Pascal's wager.

In in the posthumously published *Pensées* (1670 Section III), Pascal points out that believing in God leads to a promise of Heaven whereas not believing in God has no long-term benefit. We must either believe or not. So

> Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.

The following illustration presents the premises that lead to Pascal's wager, and the decision matrix that urges us to believe in God. The estimated benefit of believing or not is

the sum (along the row in the decision matrix) of the probability-weighted benefits when God exists or not. The infinite rewards of belief in God completely outweigh the minor inconvenience of living life as a believer (Cg – a negative value). Similarly, the infinite penalties of not believing are far worse than the transient benefit of a life of indulgence (Bn – a positive value).

Pascal's Wager

A. Premises

1. The probability (Pg) that God exists is not zero
2. Either God exists or God does not exist: the probability of the latter is therefore 1-Pg
3. The benefit for believing that God exists is infinite - eternal life in Heaven.
4. The cost (Cg) of believing in God is finite - a life of being good and abstaining from sin.
5. The benefit (Bn) of not believing in God is finite - a lifetime of indulgence.
6. The cost of not believing in God is infinite - death and damnation.

B. Decision Table

	God Exists	God Does Not Exist
Believe in God	$Pg^* \infty$	$(1-Pg)^*Cg$
Not Believe	$Pg^*(-\infty)$	$(1-Pg)^*Bn$

Pascal's logic falls apart in two ways (Bartha & Pasternack, 2018; Hájek, 2003, 2022). First, it does not discriminate among which of many possible Gods one should believe in. If there is a non-zero possibility of an Islamic God who rewards his followers with heaven and casts infidel Christians into hell, the infinite rewards and penalties associated with the Christian God are cancelled out. This is illustrated in the below. The astute observer will note that while the infinite

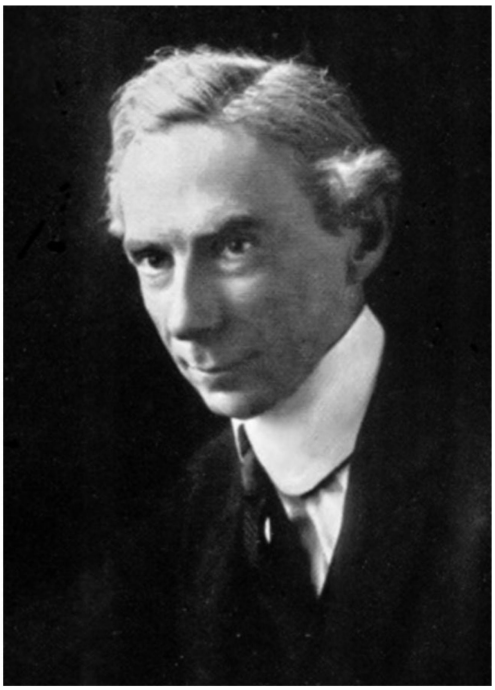
benefits and costs of believing in a particular God are cancelled out, the atheist is still stuck with probabilities of death and damnation regardless of which God exists. Perhaps, this is the human lot. The atheist, however, simply assumes that both Pg and Pa are zero.

Pascal's Wager with more than one God, e.g. there is a non-zero probability (Pa) of the Islamic God Allah as well as a non-zero probability (Pg) of the Christian God:

Decision Table

	Christian God Exists	Islamic God Exists	No God Exists
Christian Belief	Pg* ∞	Pa*(- ∞)	(1-Pg-Pa)*Cg
Islamic Belief	Pg*(- ∞)	Pa* ∞	(1-Pg-Pa)*Ca
Atheism	Pg*(- ∞)	Pa*(- ∞)	(1-Pg-Pa)*Bn

A second objection to Pascal's wager is that it presupposes not only that God might exist but also that God would reward the believer with heaven and damn the non-believer to hell. Among the credible possibilities are a benevolent God who would forgive the non-believer, and a strict God who would damn those that professed belief simply to get to heaven as hypocrites who did not "truly" believe in their hearts.



Bertrand Russell (1872-1970)

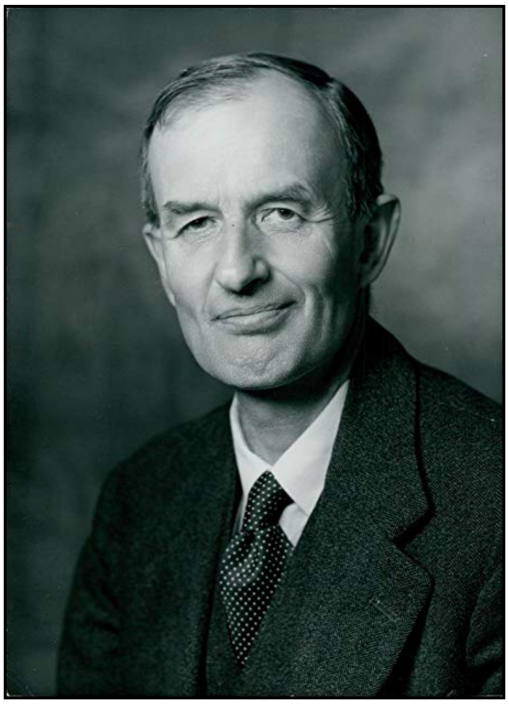
Bertrand Russell was an English philosopher, mathematician, and logician. He is most famous for the *Principia Mathematica* (1913) written together with A. N. Whitehead. This attempted to describe the basic axioms and rules underlying human logic and mathematics. Russell was also known for his pacifism and his agnosticism.

Russell was one of the first major critics of James' *The Will to Believe.* In an essay on *Pragmatism* (1910), he pointed out the James' arguments are appropriate to actions but have no real relevance to belief. He uses the example of a traveler at a fork in the road:

> I come to a fork where there is no signpost and no passer-by, I have, from the point of view of action, a 'forced' option. I must take one road or other if I am to have any chance of reaching my destination; and I may have no evidence whatever as to which is the right road. I then *act* on one or other of the two possible hypotheses, until I find someone of whom I can ask the way. But I do not *believe* either hypothesis. My action is either right or wrong, but

> my belief is neither, since I do not entertain either of the two possible beliefs. The pragmatist assumption that I believe the road I have chosen to be the right one is erroneous.

However, belief can mean different things to different people. Religious thinkers do not consider belief in the same way as a scientist or logician. In a religious context, one can decide to believe based upon the consequents that the belief will have – salvation, heaven, etc. – rather than on the evidence for the belief.



Henry Habberley Price (1899-1984)

H. H. Price was a Welsh philosopher with a major interest in perception and belief, and a minor interest in parapsychology. His 1961 Gifford lectures on *Belief* (published in 1969) analyzed the many ways in which we can believe.

He proposed that belief can be considered in two main ways – as an occurrence (a mental event) and as an attitude (a mental

state). The occurrence of belief is the moment when a person decides that something is true (based on evidence or on desire) or assents to consider it true. With respect to Russell's criticism that belief is not usually chosen, Price noted that we often come to a belief ("make up our minds") in much the same way as we decide to act. He uses as an example:

> After waiting for him for over 1½ hours I decided that John had missed the train.

Belief can also be considered as an attitude: to believe a proposition is to be disposed to act as if that proposition were true. Other attitudes are hoping, desiring, and knowing. Having an attitude may be either conscious of not. An attitude is not necessary associated with any overt behavior: it simply represents a tendency to respond in a certain way.

As I discussed in a previous post on Belief and Heresy, Price also pointed out that "believing that" differs from "believing in" (Price, 1965). Believing-that is used with a proposition: it considers that a proposition is true based on the evidence. Believing-in is used with things, persons, or ideas: it not only claims that these exist (existed or will exist) but also affirms many other related propositions. Christ stated

> I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:
> And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. (*John* 11: 25-26)

Simply asserting that Christ existed is clearly not sufficient for a person to "believe in" Christ. One must also believe that he is divine, that he died so that those who believe in him do not have to die, that he was resurrected from death, and that he lives forever. Challenging requirements for one of a skeptical disposition. However, the reward is invaluable: eternal life.

Peter van Inwagen (1942-)

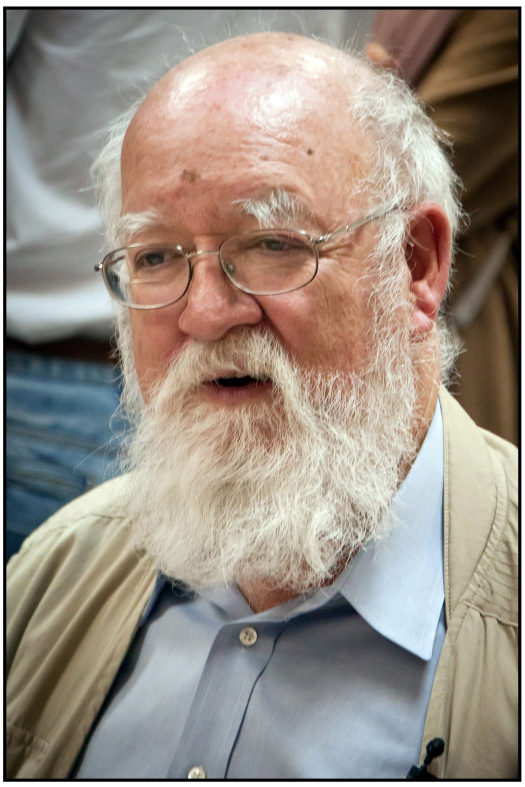
Peter van Inwagen is an American Christian philosopher who has written extensively on the philosophy of religion: *An Essay on Free Will* (1983), *The Problem of Evil* (2006), *Metaphysics* (2002).

In 1996 van Inwagen published a paper commenting Clifford's principle that we should not believe anything based upon insufficient evidence. He initially remarks that although all beliefs need to be based on evidence

> a strict adherence to the terms of the principle would lead to a chain of requests for further evidence that would terminate only in such presumably unanswerable questions as What evidence have you for supposing that your sensory apparatus is reliable? or Yes, but what considerations can you adduce in support of the hypothesis that the future will resemble the past?

More importantly, he points out that Clifford's principle has mainly been applied in criticizing religious beliefs. He notes that for complicated issues in philosophy, politics, economics, and psychiatry, the available evidence even when

properly scrutinised often leads to a diversity of opinion. Each of us may have our own insight or intuition as to what is true. Just as we do not consider it morally wrong to have these individual beliefs in philosophy, politics, etc., so we should allow religious beliefs even when the evidence for them is (necessarily) incomplete.



Daniel C. Dennett (1942-)

Daniel Dennett is an American philosopher and cognitive scientist. He has written extensively on psychology (*Consciousness Explained*,1992), evolution (*Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, 1996) and religion (*Breaking the Spell*, 2006). Together with Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris, he is considered one of "The Four Horsemen of the New Atheism."

One way to consider belief is as an interpretation of reality. Dennett has proposed that our brains are continually modelling what is going on in the world. What we are conscious of at any moment is as the "best draft" of our interpretive model

(Dennett, 1992). Our consciousness of our selves is an abstract “center of narrative gravity” that we use to interpret our experience.

Some philosophers and psychologists have denied the existence of beliefs (see Schwitzgel, 2019, for a review of “eliminativism”). Dennett considers beliefs (and other mental states) as helpful in interpreting the behavior of others who might have mental states similar to our own. He describes this mode of interpreting and predicting behavior as the “intentional stance:”

> Here is how it works: first you decide to treat the object whose behavior is to be predicted as a rational agent; then you figure out what beliefs that agent ought to have, given its place in the world and its purpose. Then you figure out what desires it ought to have, on the same considerations, and finally you predict that this rational agent will act to further its goals in the light of its beliefs. A little practical reasoning from the chosen set of beliefs and desires will in most instances yield a decision about what the agent ought to do; that is what you predict the agent will do. (Dennett, 1987, p 17)

Whatever Gets You Thru the Night

We have touched on what various philosophers have thought about belief. What can we conclude?

To survive, human beings must understand what they can about the world in which they find themselves. In some contexts, our understanding has become highly accurate. Our perceptions tell us what things are and predict what they will do; our actions manipulate the world. In other contexts – in philosophy, politics and psychiatry, for example – we often have little understanding. We do not know whether the world has a purpose, how society could be optimally organized, or why our thinking

can become disordered. Rather than just accept these uncertainties, we try out possibilities – to see whether they both fit the world and give us comfort. Often these ideas are just hunches; sometimes they become considered opinions; occasionally they become beliefs. Our beliefs are the way we make sense of the world.

Are there ethical principles that determine what we can believe (Chignell, 2018; Schmidt & Ernst, 2020)? We should base our beliefs as much as possible on the evidence available to us. However, we should not retire to an attitude of universal skepticism. We must try out hypotheses about the what we do not know about world. We remain responsible for the consequences of our actions, even if we sincerely believed those actions appropriate.

Contemplating the smallness of humanity in the immensity of the universe is frightening. Our beliefs provide us with some way to handle this fear. In the words of John Lennon's 1974 song, they are "Whatever gets you thru the night."

References

Schmidt, S., & Ernst, G. (2020). *The ethics of belief and beyond: understanding mental normativity*. Routledge.

Bartha, P. F. A. & Pasternack, L (Eds) (2018). *Pascal's wager* Cambridge University Press.

Chignell, A. (2018) The ethics of belief. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Clifford, W. K. (1877). The ethics of belief. *The Contemporary Review* 29, 289-309. Reprinted in Clifford, W. K. (1884). *The scientific basis of morals and other essays*. (pp. 25–36). J. Fitzgerald (New York).

Dennett, D. C. (1987). *The intentional stance*. MIT Press.

Dennett, D. C. (1991). *Consciousness explained*. Little, Brown.

James, W. (1877). Quelques considérations sur la méthode subjective. *Critique philosophique*, 2, 407-413. Reprinted in James W. (1978; Ed. Burkhardt, F., Bowers, F., & Skrupskelis, I. K.) *Essays in Philosophy*. Harvard University Press.

James, W. (1896) The will to believe. *The New World*, 5, 327-347. Reprinted in W. James (1897) The will to believe and other essays in popular philosophy. (pp. 1-31). Longmans Green.

Hájek, A. (2003). Waging war on Pascal's wager. *Philosophical Review*, 112: 27–56.

Hájek, A. (2022). Pascal's Wager. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Koopman, C. (2017). The Will, the Will to Believe, and William James: an ethics of freedom as self-transformation. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, *55*(3), 491–512.

McKinnon, A. (1993). Kierkegaard and "The Leap of Faith." *Kierkegaardiana* 16.

Pascal, B. (1670, translated by W. F. Trotter, 1958) Pensées/Thoughts. Dutton

Price, H. H. (1965). Belief 'in' and belief 'that.' *Religious Studies,* 1, 5-27

Price, H. H., 1969, *Belief*. Allen & Unwin.

Russell, B. (1910). *Philosophical essays*. Longmans, Green, and Co.

Schwitzgel, E. (2019). Belief. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.*

van Inwagen, P. (1996). "It is wrong, everywhere, always, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" In

J. Jordan & D. Howard-Snyder (eds.), *Faith, freedom and rationality* (pp 137–153). Rowman and Littlefield. Available online.

Wernham, J. C. S. (1987). *James's will-to-believe doctrine: a heretical view*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

The Cathars

The Cathars

From the 12th to 15th Centuries groups of people called the Cathars lived quietly in various regions of Western Europe – Northern Italy, the Rhineland and, most especially, Southern France. They followed the moral teachings of Jesus, forsaking worldly goods and loving one another, but they did not believe in the basic theology of Christianity. They considered that the world was evil, that human beings were spirits imprisoned in the flesh, and that the soul could only be set free at death if one had lived a life of purity. The Catholic Church considered these beliefs heretical, and in 1208 Pope Innocent III called for a crusade to eradicate the heresy. Named after the inhabitants of the city of Albi which had a flourishing Cathar population, the Albigensian Crusade lasted from 1209 until 1229. After years of terrible violence and cruelty, most of those who professed Cathar beliefs were dead. All that now remains of these peaceful people are the ruins of the hilltop castles in which they sought refuge.

Heresy and Dissent in the Middle Ages

The increasing secular power and the ostentatious luxury the Catholic Church were far from the life of poverty and compassion taught by Jesus. This contrast triggered dissent in

various forms (Moore, 1985). In 1098 a group of monks left the Benedictine monastery and founded the order of the Cistercians. In 1135, Henry of Lausanne, who had taught throughout the South of France that the individual believer was more important than the church, was condemned as heretical. In 1143 and again in 1163, small groups of heretics who denied the authority of the Catholic Church were burned at the stake in Cologne. In 1173 in Lyons, a merchant named Valdes (also known as Waldo) began preaching a life of apostolic poverty as the way to salvation. His followers, who became known as the Waldensians, were initially tolerated but later considered heretics.

The monk Eberwin of Steinfeld Abbey near Cologne wrote to Bernard of Clairvaux about the heretics of 1143. He was astounded by their fortitude in accepting death rather than disavowing their beliefs, and he tried to understand them:

> This is their heresy: They say that the Church exists among them only, since they alone follow closely in the footsteps of Christ, and remain the true followers of the manner of life observed by the Apostles, inasmuch as they possess neither houses, nor fields, nor property of any kind. They declare that, as Christ did not possess any of these Himself, so He did not permit His disciples to possess them. 'But you,' they say to us, 'add house to house, and field to field, and seek the things of this world. So completely is this the case, that even those among you who are considered most perfect, such as the monks and regular canons, possess these things, if not as their private property, yet as belonging to their community.' Of themselves they say: 'We are the poor of Christ; we have no settled dwelling-place; we flee from city to city, as sheep in the midst of wolves; we endure persecution, as did the Apostles and the martyrs: yet we lead a holy and austere life in fasting and abstinence, continuing day and night in labours and prayers, and seeking from these only what is necessary to sustain

> life. We endure all this,' they say,'because we are not of this world.' (Mabillon & Eales, 1896, p 390).

Bernard considered the danger of these apparently innocent heretics, and in his series of sermons on the *Song of Songs* (also known as the *Song of Solomon*), he expounded upon the verse

> Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes. (*Song of Solomon* 2:15)

He proposed that the vines are those of the Church and the little foxes are the heretics. He described the ways of their deceit:

> They study, then, to appear good in order to do injury to the good, and shrink from appearing evil that they may thus give their evil designs fuller scope. For they do not care to cultivate virtues, but only to colour their vices with a delusive tinge of virtues. Under the veil of religion, they conceal an impious superstition; they regard the mere refraining from doing wrong openly as innocence, and thus take for themselves an outward appearance of goodness only. For a cloak to their infamy they make a vow of continence. (Mabillon & Eales, 1896, p 390)

In 1145 Bernard journeyed to Toulouse to challenge the teachings of the Henricians and to bring them heretics back to the teachings of the Church. The heretics refused to listen to him.

In 1184, Pope Lucius III, dismayed by the prevalence of heresy, issued the bull *Ad abolendam diversam haeresium pravitatem* (To abolish diverse malignant heresies). This initiated (or formalized) the Episcopal Inquisition: local bishops were empowered to try suspected heretics. Once convicted, heretics were handed over to secular authorities for appropriate punishment. The church did not wish to sully itself with their death.

Heretics were executed in various ways. However, the most common sentence was burning. The first such sentence to be carried out since ancient times was at Orleans in 1022 under Robert II (also known as the “pious”), King of the Francs. The fire gave the heretics a foretaste of hell “enacting in miniature the fate that awaited all those who failed to take their place within a united Christian society” (Barbezat, 2014; see also Barbezat 2018). An illumination from the *Chroniques de France* (1487) in the British Library shows the burning of the heretics. Noteworthy is the idyllic landscape in the backgound, and the complacency of the king and his followers.

Catharism

Many of the heretics, such as those in Cologne and in the

South of France, were called “Cathars.” The name perhaps derives from the Greek *katharoi* (pure ones), but the word may also have described the worship of Satan in the form of a cat. The heretics did not use the term; rather, they considered themselves “good men” (*bons omes* in the Occitan language of the South of France).

Most of what we know about the Cathars comes from the writings of the Inquisitors. The books and manuals that the heretics may have followed were burned. In recent years there has been much discussion and dispute (e.g., Frassetto, 2006; Sennis, 2016) about whether the Cathars were a linked group of believers (in essence a church) or whether that idea was a paranoid construct of the Inquisition used to establish terror and maintain the power of the established Church. Skeptics thus believe that a Cathar was anyone who disagreed with the teachings of the Catholic Church (Moore, 1987, 2012; Pegg, 2001). The more traditional view, followed in this posting, is that the Cathars were a specific congregation of believers linked to other sects such as the Bogomils in Bulgaria (e.g. Hamilton, 2006; Frassetto, 2008).

The Cathars were dualists, both ontologically – spirit and matter were distinct and antithetical – and theologically – one god created the spiritual world and a separate god created the material universe. In these beliefs they followed a long line of Christian heretics. The Gnostics of the 2nd Century CE often considered the world in these terms. In the 3rd Century CE the Parthian prophet Mani taught that the spiritual world of light was separate from the material world of darkness. His followers believed that he was the reincarnation of earlier teachers such as Zoroaster, Buddha and Jesus. Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) was a Manichaean before he converted to orthodox Christianity. In the 8th and 9th Centuries CE, a group of dualists called the Paulicians flourished in Armenia. In the 10th Century CE, followers of the priest Bogomil (“dear to

God" in Slavic) established in Bulgaria a sect of dualist believers that called themselves by the name of their leader (or vice versa). The Bogomils (Frassetto, 2007, Chapter 1) were condemned as heretics by both the Roman and the Eastern Churches but they persisted in their beliefs, and some of them travelled to Italy, Germany and France. A lost manuscript purportedly describes a meeting in 1167 between a Bogomil priest named Nicetas from Constantinople and several Cathar believers in Saint Félix near Toulouse (Frassetto, 2007, p 78). The authenticity of the document has been questioned, but the idea rings true.

The main beliefs of the Cathars were described by the Cistercian monk Peter of Vaux-de-Cernay who was with the army of Simon de Montfort during the Albigensian Crusade (Wakefield & Evans, 1991, pp 235-241), and are detailed in the 1245 testimony of Rainerius Sacconi, an Italian Cathar who converted and became a Dominican (Wakefield & Evans, 1991, pp 329-346) and in *The Book of Two Principles* written by an Italian Cathar, John of Lugio in the mid 13th Century CE (Wakefield & Evans, 1991, pp 522-591). Oldenbourg (1961), Roquebert (1999), O'Shea (2000), Smith (2015) and McDonald (2017) provide modern summaries:

(i) **Dualism**: The Cathars believed that there were two worlds – spiritual and material – and that each world had its own god. Human beings were spiritual entities imprisoned in the flesh. The spiritual world was the "Kingdom of Heaven" that Jesus described in his beatitudes and parables. In answer to Pilate's asking him whether he was King of the Jews, Jesus had stated "My kingdom is not of the world." (*John* 18:26)

(ii) **Reincarnation**. At death the soul migrated in another body. Such an idea is widespread in the religions of the East. There is no separate afterlife, no heaven or hell. Although the life of the flesh may itself be considered hell.

(iii) ***Consolamentum.*** If a believer wished to escape the eternal cycle of reincarnation, he or she could decide to live a pure life, abstaining completely from material goods and desires. Such people were called Perfects. The decision to become a Perfect was enacted through the ceremony of *consolamentum*, wherein one already a Perfect laid hands on the head of a believer who aspired to the life of purity. This was the baptism of fire. The illustration at the right shows an illumination from a 13th Century Bible in the Bibliothèque nationale de France: two Franciscan monks stand aghast at witnessing a ceremony of consolamentum.

If the Perfects maintained their state of purity, at death they would be released from reincarnation and united with the spirit of the good God. However, any lapse from the pure life – eating meat or any of the products of procreation (milk, eggs), indulging in sexual intercourse – would render them (and whomever they had provided *consolamentum*) no longer Perfect.

(iv) **Apostolic Life:** The Cathars followed in the basic teachings of Jesus. They used the Lord's prayer. They believed a compassionate life dedicated to the benefit of their fellows and in the rejection of all worldly possessions. In the latter they followed the injunctions of Jesus:

> Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal:
> But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:
> For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (*Matthew* 6: 19-21)

(v) **Denial of Church Dogma**: Although they believed in the ethical teachings of Jesus, the Cathars rejected most of the teachings and sacraments of the Catholic Church. They denied the baptism by water, preferring the true baptism by fire. They refused the sacrament of marriage since they thought that procreation only served to maintain the endless cycle of reincarnation. They had no patience with the Trinity, and were uncertain about whether Jesus was God incarnate. Many of the Cathars in the South of France believed that Jesus was human and was married to Mary Magdalene.

(vi) **Oaths:** The Cathars refused to take oaths. In this they were following the instructions of Jesus

> But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne:
> Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King.
> Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black.
> But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil. (*Matthew* 5: 34-37)

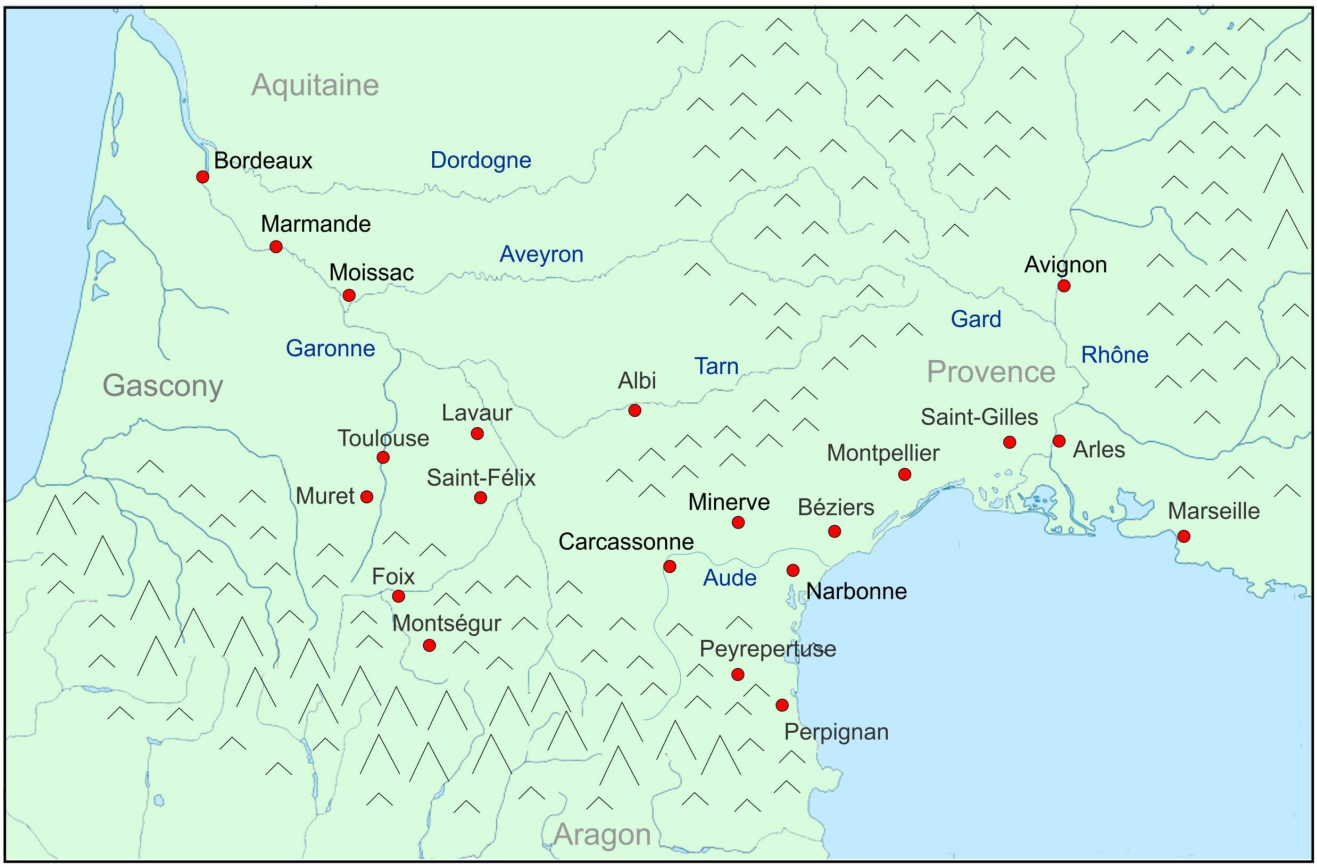
This was a severe problem in a feudal society, wherein all relations depended upon oaths of fealty.

(vii) **Role of women:** The Cathars denied that women should be subordinate to men. Many Cathar Perfects were women.

Languedoc

By the end of the 12th Century the Cathar heresy had become widespread in the South of France. The language spoken in this region was Occitan or the *langue d'oc.* This Romance language used *oc* to mean "yes," unlike French or *langue d'oïl* which used *oïl* (later *oui*) or Spanish which used *si.* Each region spoke its own dialect of Occitan, the most prominent of these being Provençal in the east and Gascon in the west.

At that time, the Languedoc region, named after the language, was a patchwork of different political entities. The most prominent leader was Raymond VI of the Saint-Gilles family which controlled Toulouse and regions in Provence. Raymond-Roger II Trencavel governed the region of Carcassonne and Bézier. Raymond-Roger of Foix in the foothills of the Pyrenees was an important ally of Toulouse. His wife and sister had both become Cathar Perfects. All these leaders had feudal ties to Pedro II, King of Aragon in Northern Spain. The illustration below shows a map of the region:



Languedoc was flourishing. The land produced a bounty of wine, olive oil, and wool. Weavers abounded and cloth merchants became rich. The region was a major trading crossroads linking Spain and the Mediterranean to the North and West of France. Its leaders fostered tolerance. A large Jewish society fostered both trade and new learning. Much of the medieval development of the Kabbalah occurred in Provence and in Northern Spain (Boboc, 2009).

Life was to be enjoyed. Time was available for chivalry and courtly love. The poetry of the troubadours (Chaytor,1912; Paterson, 1993) brought the rhymes and rhythms of Arabic poetry into the literature of romance languages. Dante called the Occitan poet Arnaut Daniel *il miglior fabbro* (the best [word]smith), and Petrarch called him the *gran maestre d'amore.* The following are a few lines with translation by Ezra Pound:

Tot quant es gela Though all

things freeze here
Mas ieu non puesc frezir I can naught
feel the cold
C’amors novela For new
love sees here
Mi fal cor reverdir My
heart’s new leaf unfold.

Pope Innocent III

In 1198 Lotario dei Conti di Segni became Pope Innocent III. He was aware of the dissension in the church and initially sympathetic to those who criticized priestly affluence. During his reign (1198-1216), he founded two new medicant orders: the Franciscans led by Francis of Assisi in 1209 and the Dominicans led by Domingo Félix de Guzman in 1216. The illustration below shows frescoes of Saint Francis (by a follower of Giotto c. 1300; Innocent III by and anonymous artist, c 1225 and Saint Dominic by Fra Angelico, c. 1440).

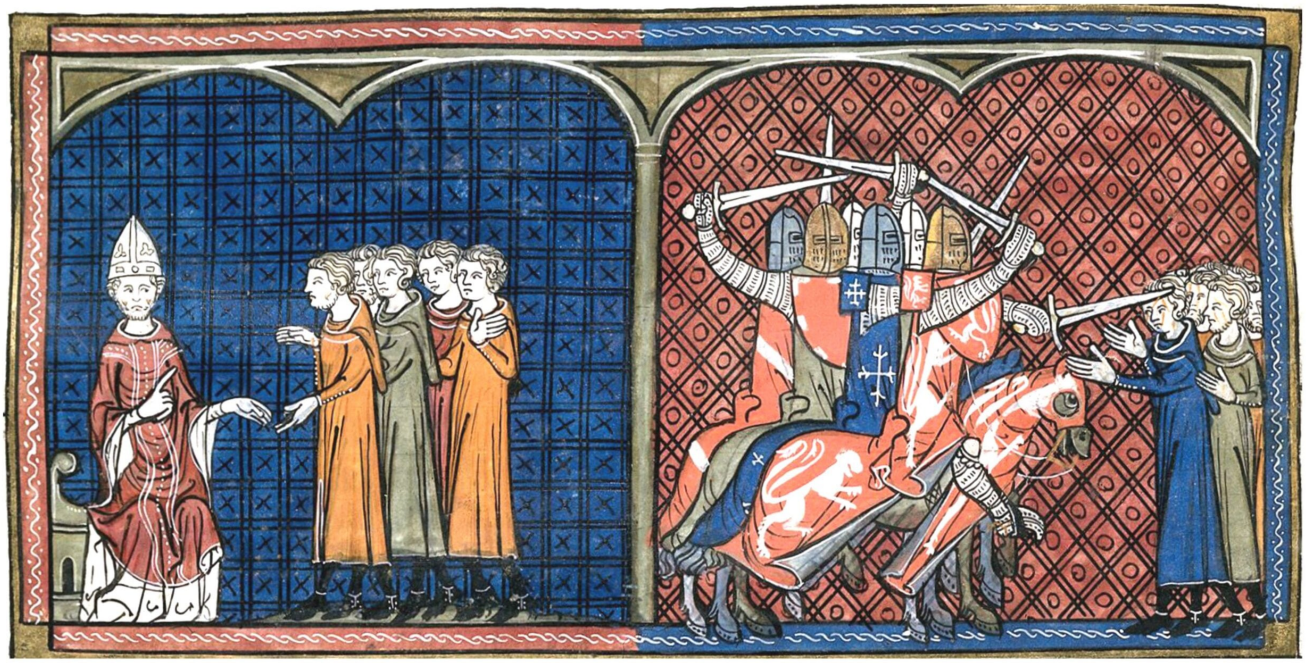


In 1202 Innocent III initiated the disastrous Fourth Crusade to the Holy Land. The crusaders, attracted by the hope of plunder and egged on by the Venetians, sacked Constantinople instead of freeing the Holy Land. Only a few crusaders refused to participate in the sack and travelled on to Palestine, among them Simon de Montfort.

Innocent III was particularly concerned by the Cathars in Languedoc and urged Raymond VI of Toulouse to contain their heresy. He sent many priests, among them Saint Dominic, to dispute with the heretics and to urge them to return to the church. Their efforts were to no avail. The following illustration shows two paintings by Pedro Berruguete from about 1495. The left represents a legendary meeting between Dominic and the Cathars. Books of Cathar and Catholic teachings were submitted to trial by fire. Only the teachings of the Catholic Church were miraculously preserved and rose above the assembled disputants. On the right Dominic presides over an *auto-da-fé* (Portuguese, act of faith) for the burning of heretics. However, there is no evidence that the saint participated in any trials of the heretics: he died in 1221 long before the Papal Inquisition was established in 1231. Berruguete's paintings were commissioned by the Spanish Inquisition founded in 1475. That institution with its frequent autos-da-fé was sorely in need of a founding saint, and was more concerned with terror than with truth.

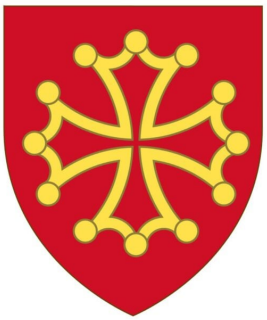
In 1207 the papal legate, Pierre de Castelnau, excommunicated Raymond VI of Toulouse. In January of 1208 Pierre negotiated with Raymond at Saint-Gilles but refused to absolve him. Pierre was then murdered at the Rhône River as he travelled back to Rome. No one knows who ordered his assassination but Raymond was held responsible. Raymond submitted to being scourged as penance for the death in June of 1209. However, by then the Pope had already called for a Crusade against the Cathars (or Albigensians) and Christian knights from the North of France had rallied to the cause, driven as much in hope for power and plunder as by desire to defend the faith. The Crusaders were led by the knight Simon IV de Montfort and by Arnaud Amaury (or Almaric), the 17th abbot of Cîteaux, mother house of the Cistercians. The following illustration from the

Les Grandes chroniques de France (14th Century, folio 374) now in the British Library shows Innocent III excommunicating the Cathars and the subsequent Albigensian Crusade.



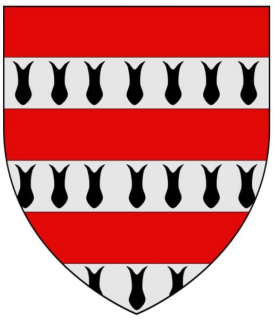
Below are shown the coats of arms for the participants in the Albigensian Crusade. The upper line shows the powers of Languedoc and Aragon; the lower line the crusaders. The Pope's arms would have added a papal tiara and the keys of Saint Peter to the basic arms of the house of Segni. The kings of the Francs were from the house of Capet.

Toulouse



Aragon

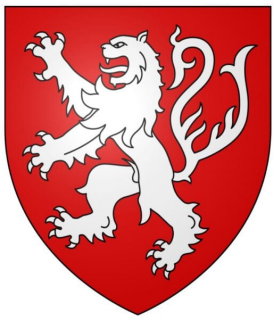
Trencavel



Foix

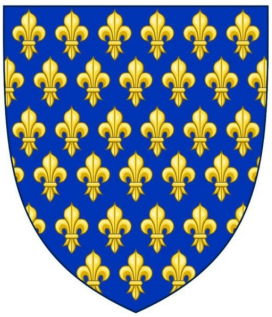
Segni

Montfort



Burgundy

Capet



Béziers

The first engagement of the Crusaders was the siege of Béziers, whose citizens were Catholic Cathar and Jew. The huge army encamped outside the city walls on July 22, 1209, the feast day of Mary Magdalene. The following picture is from the manuscript of the *Canso de la Crozada* (Shirley 2016). This epic poem was begun by Guillaume de Tudela and completed by another anonymous troubadour. The writing was likely finished by 1219 (the date of the last event it records), but the only extant manuscript comes from 1275. The illustrations were outlined in preparation for painting but, although the decorated initials beginning each section (or *laisse*) were illuminated, the outlines never were. (The actual illustration is from an engraving based on the drawing – the manuscript drawing is very faint):

The text in Occitan can be translated as:

> On the feast of St Mary Magdalen, the abbot of Cîteaux brought his huge army to Béziers and encamped it on the sandy plains around the city. Great, I am sure, was the terror inside the walls, for never in the host of Menelaus, from whom Paris stole Helena, were so many tents set up on the plains below Mycenae (Shirley, 2016, laisse 18)

A minor skirmish between the defenders and the besiegers led to the gates of the city being left open. The camp followers and mercenaries stormed through and began looting the city. The knights followed. The result was a massacre. Various reports numbered the dead as anywhere between 10,000 and 20,000 people. No distinction was made between Catholic and Cathar. Everyone died.

A Cistercian chronicler later reported that Arnaud Amaury was

afraid that the Cathars in the city would falsely claim to be pious Catholics and escape to spread their heresy. When asked how to distinguish between believer and heretic, he is reported to have said *Caedite eos. Novit Dominus qui sunt eius* (Kill them all. The lord knows those that are his own). This may not be true, but he would have been familiar with the words, which derive from a verse in the New Testament describing how only true believers go to heaven.

> Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. (II Timothy 2:19)

Carcassonne

The Crusaders then moved on and laid siege to Carcassonne on the banks of the Aude River. The city lacked its own supply of water and could not hold out for long. Under promise of safe conduct Raymond-Roger Trencavel therefore negotiated the surrender of the city. All the citizens of the city were spared but they were forced to leave without taking anything with them. The illustration on the right from *Les Grandes chroniques de France* shows them leaving the city without even the clothes on their back. Simon de Montfort was granted dominion over Carcassonne and Béziers. Raymond-Roger was imprisoned in his own dungeon in Carcassonne and died there within a few months.

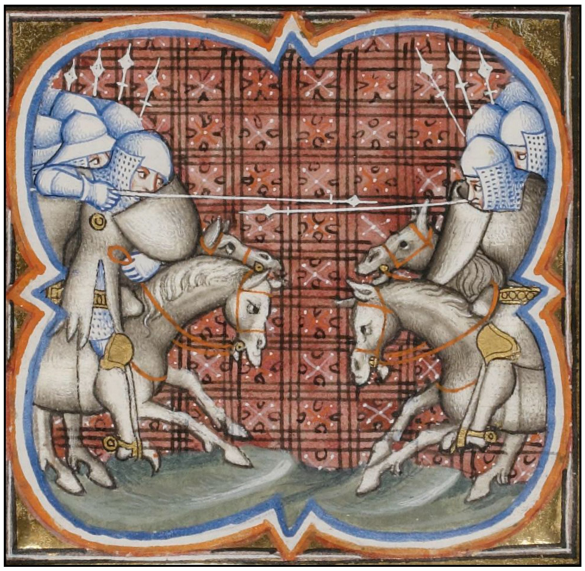
Mass Burnings

After Carcassonne, the army moved on to besiege other Languedoc towns and cities. After a month of siege in 1210, Simon de Montfort accepted the surrender of Minerve, and agreed to spare its inhabitants. However, Arnaud Amaury insisted that they should all be asked to swear allegiance to the Catholic Church. One hundred and forty Cathar Perfects refused and were burned at the stake outside the town. This was the first of the many mass immolations that would recur throughout the crusade. Among the most heinous of these executions, four hundred Cathar Perfects were burned at Lavaur

in 1211.

The Battle of Muret

Simon de Montfort continued to take various towns and cities in Languedoc, but stayed away from Toulouse, which was large and well defended. Raymond VI of Toulouse negotiated support from Pedro II of Aragon and from Raymond-Roger of Foix and in 1213 a large army assembled on the plain outside the city walls of Muret just south of Toulouse, where the forces of Simon de Montfort were garrisoned. The crusaders were vastly outnumbered. Some reported a ratio of 10 to 1 although it was more likely 3 to 1.



Early in the morning of September 12, 1213, Simon de Montfort said his prayers and led his knights out along the Garonne River away from the encampment of the besiegers. After a while he turned and led a ferocious charge against the besiegers (see illustration on the right from *Les Grandes chroniques de France*). The southerners turned toward them but the knights of the Crusaders hit the besiegers at full speed shattering their defenses and breaking through their lines (O'Shea, 2000, pp 141-149). The result was a complete rout. Among the thousands of Toulousian and Aragonese dead was Pedro II. Less than one hundred Crusaders died.

Toulouse

Toulouse remained unconquered. In 1215, the Pope convened the Fourth Lateran Council to broker disputes within the Christian lands. Raymond VI journeyed to Rome to plead the case for an independent Toulouse, but the council ultimately granted Simon de Montfort dominion over all of Languedoc. The crusaders, recently reinforced by prince Louis of France (later to become King Louis VIII), came to take up residence in Toulouse. In 1216, Raymond VI returned to regain his patrimony. Over the next two years the city changed hands several times.

On June 25, 1218, Simon de Montfort coming to the aid of his brother Guy who had been wounded in an assault on the city walls, was struck by a boulder launched by a catapult from within the city walls (illustration on the right from a 19th-Century engraving):

> This was worked by noblewomen, by little girls and men's wives, and now a stone arrived just where it was needed and struck Count Simon on his steel helmet, shattering his eyes,

> brains back teeth, forehead and jaw. Bleeding and black the count dropped dead on the ground (Shirley 2016, p 172)

The poet who wrote the latter parts of the *Canso de la Crozada* (Shirley, 2016) did not grieve the death of Simon. He reported that the crusaders took Simon's body to Carcassonne for burial, and imagined a fitting epitaph. The original version in Occitan gives a flavor of the rhyming of troubadour poetry:

> Tot dreit a Carcassona l'en portan sebelhir
> El moster S. Nazari celebrar et ufrir,
> E ditz el epictafi, cel quil sab ben legir :
> Qu'el es sans ez es martirs, e que deu resperir,
> E dins el gaug mirable heretar e florir,
> E portar la corona e el regne sezir;
> Ez ieu ai auzit dire c'aisis deu avenir:
> Si per homes aucirre ni per sanc espandir,
> Ni per esperitz perdre ni per mortz cosentir,
> E per mals cosselhs creire, e per focs abrandir,
> E per baros destruire, e per Paratge aunir,
> E per las terras toldre, e per orgolh suffrir,
> E per los mals escendre, e pel[s] bes escantir,
> E per donas aucirre e per efans delir,
> Pot hom en aquest segle Jhesu Crist comquerir,
> El deu portar corona e el cel resplandir!

> [Straight to Carcassonne they carried it and buried it with masses and offerings in the church of St Nazaire. The epitaph says, for those who can read it, that he is a saint and martyr who shall breathe again and shall in wondrous joy inherit and flourish, shall wear a crown and be seated in the kingdom. And I have heard it said that this must be so – if by killing men and shedding blood, by damning souls and causing deaths, by trusting evil counsels, by setting fires, destroying men, dishonouring *paratge*, seizing lands and encouraging pride, by kindling evil and quenching good, by killing women and slaughtering children, a man can in this world win Jesus Christ, certainly Count Simon wears a crown

and shines in heaven above. (Shirley, 2016, laisse 208)]

The word *paratge* in Occitan is difficult to translate. It derives from the Latin *par* (equal) and is thus similar to the English word "peerage." However, it had come to mean all that was good in Occitan society: equality, honor, chivalry, hospitality, *joie de vivre*.

The End of the Crusade

After the death of Simon de Montfort, the crusade continued intermittently. Various strongholds in the domain of Toulouse were conquered by the crusaders. Louis VIII of France became the main leader of the crusade. He conquered the city of Marmande in 1219 but was unable to take Toulouse. Many of the Cathars retreated to mountain strongholds. Raymond VI died in 1222; Raymond-Roger of Foix died in 1223. Their heirs lacked their strength and charisma. Most historians date the end of the Crusade to 1229 when the Treaty of Paris was signed in Meaux, granting the Kingdom of France dominion over all the lands previously held by Toulouse.

In order to root out the remaining Cathars in Languedoc, Pope Gregory IX established the Papal Inquisition in 1231. Instead of allowing local bishops investigate heretics, the pope appointed itinerant inquisitors from among the ranks of the Dominicans and the Franciscans. Accompanied by clerks and lawyers, these inquisitors travelled throughout the region of Languedoc, seeking out heretics, bringing them to trial, and handing them over to the secular authorities for burning (Deane, 2011, Chapter 3) For their faithful service the Dominicans became known as the Dogs of God (*Domini canes*).

One of the last Cathar refuges to fall was Montségur (Occitan for "safe hill") a castle built on top of a steep and isolated peak known in Occitan as a *puog* (illustrated below). The castle was 170 m above the plain and the stronghold was virtually impregnable. In 1242 two inquisitors were murdered

by Cathars from Montségur. The French forces (now under Louis IX) began the siege of the isolated mountain stronghold in May 1243. Slowly and inexorably the French came closer to city until it was within range of their catapults. The castle finally surrendered in March 1244. About 220 Cathar Perfects were burned to death on the field below the puog. This became known as the *Plat dels Cremats* (field of the burned).

Saint Peter Martyr

The Inquisition moved on from Languedoc to the Northern Italy. In 1852, Peter of Verona, a Dominican friar, was appointed Inquisitor in Lombardy. When returning from Como to Milan, Peter and his companion Domenic were assassinated by assassins hired by the Milanese Cathars. This is illustrated in a 1507 painting by Giovanni Bellini (see below). Despite the foreground violence one can see in the distance a countryside of peace and beauty. The woodsmen go about their work. The light from the harvest shines through the trees.

Albi

In 1282 work was begun on the new Cathedral Basilica of Saint Cecilia in Albi, which was to become the largest brick building in the world. With its narrow windows and huge tower, it dominates the city like a fortress, a true bastion against heresy (see below). Above the high altar a vast fresco of the Last Judgement reminds the people of Languedoc of the torments that await those that do not follow the true teachings.

Peyrepertuse

The history of the Cathars should not end with the formidable Cathedral of Albi. More fitting is the Cathar castle of Peyrepertuse (from Occitan *pèirapertusa*, pierced rock). It was finally surrendered to the French in 1240, and later became part of the French border defences.

References

Barbezat, M. D. (2014) The fires of hell and the burning of heretics in the accounts of the executions at Orleans in 1022. *Journal of Medieval History*, 40(4), 399-420,

Barbezat, M. D. (2018). *Burning Bodies: Communities, Eschatology, and the Punishment of Heresy in the Middle Ages*. Cornell University Pres

Boboc, R. (2009). Kabbalists, Cathars and Ismailis: Forms of Gnosis in the 11th–13th Century. *Studia Hebraica*, *9-10*, 267–293.

Chaytor, H. J. (1912). *The troubadours*. Cambridge University Press.

Deane, J. K. (2022). *A history of medieval heresy and inquisition*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Frassetto, M. (Ed.) (2006). *Heresy and the Persecuting Society in the Middle Ages: Essays on the Work of R. I. Moore*. Brill.

Frassetto, M. (2008). *The great medieval heretics: five centuries of religious dissent*. BlueBridge.

Hamilton, B. (2006). Bogomil influences on Western heresy. In Frassetto, M. (ed.) *Heresy and the Persecuting Society in the Middle Ages: Essays on the Work of R. I. Moore*. (pp 93-114) Brill.

Leglu, C., Rist, R., & Taylor, C. (2014). *The Cathars and the Albigensian Crusade: a sourcebook*. Routledge.

Mabillon, J., & Eales, S.J. (1896) Collected works of Bernard of Clairvaux. Volume IV. Cantica canticorum. Eighty-six sermons on the Song of Songs. John Hodges

Marvin, L. W. (2008). *The Occitan War: a military and political history of the Albigensian Crusade, 1209-1218*. Cambridge University Press.

McDonald, J. (2017). Cathars and Cathar Beliefs in the Languedoc (Informative website).

Moore, R. I. (1985). *The origins of European dissent*. Blackwell.

Moore, R. I. (1987, revised 2007). *The formation of a persecuting society authority and deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250*. Blackwell.

Moore, R. I. (2012). *The war on heresy*. Belknap Press

Oldenbourg, Z. (1959, translated by P. Green, 1961). *Massacre at Montségur: a history of the Albigensian Crusade.* Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

O’Shea, S. (2000). *The perfect heresy: the revolutionary life and death of the medieval Cathars*. Walker

Paterson, L. M. (1993). *The world of the troubadours: medieval Occitan society, c. 1100-c. 1300*. Cambridge University Press.

Pegg, M. G. (2001). On Cathars, Albigenses, and good men of Languedoc. *Journal of Medieval History*, *27*(2), 181–195.

Roquebert, M. (1999). *Histoire des cathares: hérésie, croisade, Inquisition du XIe au XIVe siècle*. Perrin.

Sennis, A. C. (Ed.) (2016). *Cathars in question*. York Medieval Press.

Shirley, J. (2016). *The song of the Cathar wars: a history of the Albigensian Crusade*. Routledge.

Sioen, G. & Roquebert, M. (2001). *Cathares: la terre et les hommes*. Place des Victoires.

Smith, A. P. (2015). *The lost teachings of the Cathars: their beliefs and practices*. Watkins.

Wakefield, W. L., & Evans, A. P. (1991). *Heresies of the high Middle Ages*. Columbia University Press.

Wakefield, W. L. (1974). *Heresy, Crusade, and Inquisition in Southern France, 1100–1250*. University of California Press