

TRUE BELIEVERS

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It is not often that three books, written 62 years apart, by different authors and on disparate subjects, conspire to illuminate some of our most vexing current predicaments. **Stephen Greenblatt's "Swerve" (2013)** is a thinly disguised adventure story, telling of the re-discovery of Titus Lucretius Caro's "On the Nature of Things" and how it became the catalyst to the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and modernity.

Lucretius, a 1st-Century BC philosopher, re-introduced Rome to the works of the 4th-Century BC Greek atomist Epicure, challenging the contemporary beliefs of both the dominant pagan Stoics and nascent Christianity, soon threatening to undermine the early Church with three explosive theses: First, the physical universe is neither created nor controlled by a Divine agent. It has always existed, ever mutating, governed by rules of nature. These rules are not a revealed dogma held on blind faith and laid down in holy scriptures. Rather, they are discoverable, progressively, by the fallible human mind through science, a method founded on facts, reason, and--last but not least--doubt.

Second, no immortal soul survives death, an integral part of life that claims body and soul alike. Tales of an afterlife are but a comforting illusion. And lastly, human morality is not mandated by the Divine as a testament to His glory. Rather, it is a requisite part of being human, governed by plain natural principles: Maximize pleasure, minimize pain, do no harm. Morality is thus about treating fellow humans decently, humanely, equitably. That is, Christ's Golden Rule.

The early Church tagged Lucretius aptly as a mortal threat, a heresy to be exposed and stamped out. With full Imperial license following the Nicea Council of 325 AD, Lucretian-Epicurian manuscripts, much like many 'heretic' early Gospels, were hunted down in homes and libraries and torched. Yet, paradoxically, Medieval Catholic scribes kept reading, copying and preserving the banned Greek and Latin manuscripts in moldering corners of monastic libraries.

"Swerve" recounts the rediscovery of "On the Nature of Things" in 1417, in a Southern German monastery, by a restless Papal bureaucrat named Poggio Bracciolini; and the monumental impact it had on major Renaissance and Enlightenment figures in science (Galileo, Copernicus, Giordano Bruno, Bacon, Newton), in letters (Cervantes, Shakespeare, Ben Johnson, Spenser, Donne, Dryden), in art (Botticelli, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, Caravaggio), and in social philosophy (Machiavelli, Erasmus, Thomas More, Hobbes, Spinoza, Montaigne). It also recounts the closely-related resurrection of the Greek and Latin classics by Petrarca, Dante, Boccaccio and their cohorts; and how the French and British Enlightenment--Diderot, d'Alambert, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hume, Adam Smith--picked up the main Lucretian themes: A world explained by factual, rational, doubting science; human morality evolved to cherish life and liberty. Our Founding Fathers, veritable children of Lucretius and the Enlightenment, aptly tacked on "the pursuit of happiness".

On the face of it, **Frans deWaal**, an eminent primatologist and evolutionary psychologist, could not be farther removed from the humanist and Shakespeare scholar Greenblatt. Still, the core lessons of "**The Bonobo and the Atheist**" (2013) are remarkably in tune with Lucretius--the centrality of the Golden Rule to the evolution of human morality. The very same natural principle that underlies human cooperation--Adam Smith's empathic *Moral Sentiment*--is abundantly manifest in the Primate Humanism of our evolutionary next-to-kin.

Unlike many in-your-face atheists (Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins), deWaal, a lapsed Catholic, does not trash religion, but rather notes how it has served a salutary role in human cultural evolution, codifying and rewarding moral behavior. But the universal moral principles enshrined by religion are already manifest in the cooperative, altruistic, empathic behavior of our primate kin.

What Greenblatt and deWaal describe, each in his own domain, is the yawning chasm, ever since the Renaissance, between faith and science. When people ask me "Do you believe in evolution?" I am tempted to answer tongue in cheek--"Who does?" Then I explain: Scientists don't "believe" in evolution. It is just their simplest *explanatory hypothesis*, the one most compatible with the facts as we currently know them: Extant species variation, embryology and maturation, the fossil record and carbon dating, molecular genetics, plant and animal domestication and, more recently, lab-induced genetic selection. Unlike faith, science doubts its own hypotheses, then tries to test their factual predictions. Failure to falsify is not a proof, only a temporary reprieve. Your hypothesis survives for now, but new facts or better reasoning may yet debunk it. A scientific theory is meaningless unless it specifies the condition under which it can be proven false.

To best appreciate how relevant Greenblatt's and deWaal's accounts are to our current predicaments, both at home and abroad, take a fresh look at a forgotten classic, **Eric Hoffer's "The True Believer" (1951)**. A self-educated folk philosopher, Hoffer surveys the rise of mass movements, be they religious (Christianity, Judaism, Islam), national (Nationalism, Anti-Colonialism, Zionism) or political (Communism, Fascism, Nazism), teasing out the salient features that give them their seductive power: (a) Alienation from the drab present; (b) Idealization of a mythic past; (c) The future as Shining City on the Hill; (d) Visceral condemnation of "the other" as Enemy or Devil; (e) Blind Faith in the redeeming power of revealed dogma.

Mass movements, Hoffer notes, don't thrive on rational analysis of the current state or imagined alternatives. To quote Rudolph Hess, Hitler's chief propagandist: "...Do not seek Adolph Hitler with your brain; all of you will find him with the strength of your heart..." As Hoffer observes, the True Believer's rejection of rationality and doubt in favor of blind faith marks, equally, *both* extremes of the political spectrum, making them nigh interchangeable.

How is all this relevant to us, here and now? As a hint and foretaste, a prophetic line from the old cartoon strip *Pogo*: "We have seen the enemy, and it is us".



Last spring, the ugly spectacle of the La Plata Electric Association's elections in La Plata County, Colorado, would have seemed all too familiar to Eric Hoffer: Take-no-prisoners environmentalists, bent on wrenching control, battling flame-throwing climate deniers dead-set on torching the planet for maximal profit. In a testimony to the sanity of the Coop's membership, the contest ended in a draw, foreshadowing a long drawn zero-sum battle between two extremes that can't see their way to a pragmatic compromise.

My favorite tale-of-woes of True Belief is how the great metropolis of Phoenix, Arizona elected, as their new Superintendent of Public Instruction, a home-schooler with no college degrees or experience in public education. She had, however, a winning trump card--the scourge of Common Core, an innocuous standard developed by academics and professional educators who, God save us all, believe in non-sectarian public schools, fact-based science, and an educated work-force.

Common Core was never imposed on States or school districts, only made available. But to the true believers and conspiracy buffs it was a sinister plot, hatched by the U.N. and Tri-Lateral Commission, to inculcate innocent American kids with Godless rationality. In his Arizona Republic column (11-13-14), Ed Montini cites the letter of a Phoenix math teacher: "...I teach math that is based on Common Core, and my students are not being controlled by the feds. They are learning to think, to analyze, to compare. All the things that you want voters to do..." For balance, Montini also cites the letter of another reader: "...yes, she is unqualified except for the R after her name. But Arizona needed another pointy-headed liberal PhD finding ways to 'educate' children that their parents are stupid for being religious like *you* need another hole in your head..."

In a recent New York Times report ("New Freedoms in Tunisia Drive Support for ISIS", 10-24-14), David Kirkpatrick recounts the deflating saga of the Moslem Middle-East: **Iran 1989**--we dump the repressive Shah, they elect the abusive Ayatollahs. **Algeria 1991**--we brow-beat the generals into free elections, the regressive Islamists win. **Turkey 2004**--we pester the Army into free elections, the Islamists sweep in. **Iraq 2005**--we spill our blood and treasures for their free elections, the winning Shi'ites proceeds to abuse their Sunni and Kurd minorities. **Palestine 2007**--we lean on the Palestinian Authority to hold fair elections, the murderous Hamas wins. **Egypt 2011**--we dump the repressive Mubarak, the toxic Moslem Brotherhood takes over. **Libya 2012**--our NATO proxies depose Qadhafi, Islamic militias take over. **Syria 2012**: We push democracy on the vile Assad, the murderous ISIS 'liberates' the north.

Is the tyranny of the majority in the 'liberated' Middle East an accident? Not if you note how densely their Qur'an is peppered with dark exclusionist invective: "...woeful punishment awaits the unbelievers..." (Cow, 2:104); "...the unbelievers are like beasts...deaf, dumb and blind, they understand nothing..." (Cow, 2:170); "...as for the unbelievers...they shall become the fuel of the fire..." (Cow, 3:9)

The ills of fundamentalist Islam are all too easy to diagnose: Stuck in the Middle Ages, they have missed on Lucretius, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and Adam Smith's *Moral Sentiment*, where empathy for "the other"--a.k.a. minority rights, a.k.a. separation of Church and State--is enshrined in Lucretian natural morality. But is it only *them*? Or should one wonder, with Christ: "...why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?..." (Matthew, 7:3)

What pops out of both their scriptures and ours, again and again, is Eric Hoffer's True Believer, whose searing vision, revealed by Prophets, Messiahs or Mahdis and taken on blind faith, disdains our pluralistic, humanistic, doubting science and the open society that comes in its wake. Or, in the near-Biblical invective of our just-retired Sheriff: "...your liberal, democratic, gun hating, pot loving, abortionist, Obama supporting socialists..."

Here are some choice exterminatory nuggets from the Old Testament: "...for you are a sacred people to Jehovah your God...his chosen people above all the peoples on the face of the earth..." (Deut. 7:6); "...and God shall give them to you, and you shall beat them and destroy them, and you shall not make peace with them or pity them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons nor your sons to their daughters..." (Deut. 7:2-3); "...and they wiped out everybody in the city, from man to woman, from young to old and oxen and donkeys all put to the sword...and Joshua swore to Jehovah: Cursed be he who ever rises to re-build Jericho..." (Josh. 6:21-26)

The same exclusionist prose can be found in the Gospels, oddly interspersed among Jesus's sweet exhortations to love, compassion and tolerance: "...I am the way, the truth, the life. No one comes to the Father except through me..." (John 14:6); "...he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal damnation..." (Mark 3:28-29); "...he who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me is cast abroad..." (Matthew 12:30)

Home and abroad, the True Believers are driving us to rapid extinction. Their mantra is the single-minded *My Way or the Highway*. Their game is winner-take-all and zero-sum, rather than impure compromise and win-win. They embrace Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and ruthless free markets but reject his empathic *Theory of Moral Sentiment*. They welcome the Darwin of selfish genes and individual selection but ignore the Darwin of cooperation and group selection. They welcome Christ's ominous Last Judgement but ignore his compassionate *Do Onto Others*. For the True Believer, "the other"--be they the immigrant, the liberated woman, the black and brown, the homosexual, the redneck or the agnostic--is a Devil-spawned impurity, not a potential partner. We let the True Believers have their way with us at our own peril.