

huh?
what category?

INTERVIEW VIII

Theology *Theodicy.*

ML: Any venture that looks to deal with the philosophical problem of evil, fits this category. And there are many. They are called ~~theodicies~~ *theodicies* and I will cite a number of ~~them~~, but there are so many I will move to the next so soon as you, from your point of view *have* ~~has~~ done your best to refute the premise.

NM: Agreed.

ML: God's ultimate purpose, some philosophers say, is to glorify Himself. He, by definition, He, alone, is infinitely entitled to do that without vanity. But He does allow evil to exist so we will appreciate His goodness all the more. It is analogous to the way that the blind man healed by Jesus appreciated sight more than those around him who had never experienced such a condition.

NM: Let me take up first what I have never understood. Why is there this enormous desire in God to be glorified? Why is that so acceptable to so many branches of religion? We laugh at people who insist on being constantly glorified. We speak of neurotic movie stars or spoiled athletes, crazy generals and impossible authors, mad kings and greed-bag tycoons. One of the few things we all seem to agree on is that excessive vanity, once it has grown into a thing in itself, is dire. By that logic, a god-sized vanity is hard to comprehend. Where is the need for it?

ML: Maybe we can change "glorified" to "loved." God wants to be loved.

NM: Why does God need to be loved? That's a large question. It may be true, but if God needs to be loved, then I think we are entitled to start posing a few questions. Is God's need to be loved so crucial because God, like us, is over-extended? When, after all, do we have our greatest need to be appreciated? It is precisely when we are worn thin—precisely those times when our courage, our stamina, our determination, our belief that we possess worth, is attenuated. At such times, we are more in need of love.

ML: Are you saying that is where God is now?

NM: It is the only justification I can comprehend for God needing so much adoration from us.

ML: Moving to my second point, do you have any interest in the argument that He allows evil to exist in order to intensify our love for Him all the more?

NM: I find that strange. I've always been bothered by the excessive love that God appears to demand, or, worse, that the churchmen who rule His places of worship insist upon. "Jesus needs your love, Jesus wants your love." Well, Jesus is giving love, presumably. Does He need it in order to return it? What they're saying—without understanding, because they never follow anything to conclusion—but one of the elements in their thinking that repels most serious young people away from theology, is that fundamentalists, for example, seem to make a point of not contemplating the consequences of their thought. For if God does need a great deal of love, then why? Why? The question has to be asked. Doesn't it suggest that we dwell in a situation where God's fate depends upon our development as well—the good or evil world that we are developing?

Now, all we have to work with in these theological speculations is what we know from our own experience. People who need love desperately are not often in good shape. If God created us in His or Her image, which I do believe, then God must also want us to understand some real portion of what is going on in His universe. It is to God's advantage, I would argue,

for us to understand what God's needs might be. Unless, on the other hand, human history has been so vile and so awful, so permeated by the large and little triumphs of the Devil, that God has a legitimate fear of being destroyed by mankind so soon as humans obtain enough power. That may be a real possibility. If it is, exorbitant requests for love become even more disturbing.

ML: Here is another theodicy: Evil is one of the means by which God can test humanity and see if we are worthy of His grace and His love. The evil and the suffering that comes to us prove to be educational; it can make us better people. He is testing us and the tests are good for us.

NM: I find that offensive. Apply it to a parent and a child. We test the child—and in some situations we do test a child—but do we do it to see if the child is worthy of our love? Literature is rife with portraits of detestable parents, fathers and mothers of that detestable ilk.

ML: Consider the second part: it is educational for us. It makes us better people. We do that with children—we do test them to improve them, we say, "Now that you've been through this, you're a better person for it." We do that all the time to our children.

NM: On the other hand, there is also large vanity in the assumption that God knows all about evil. Why not try to live with the notion that God is

trying to discover what evil is about? What if evil is, at present, more bottomless than good? Isn't that a corollary of the notion that God is not all-powerful? What, after all, is God's relation to evil? Is He trying to discover more about it? May it be that God doesn't comprehend evil all that well, any more than as parents we are always quick to understand if our children are siding toward evil. Are parents always the first to know?

ML: It was Dostoyevsky who said suffering is the sole origin of consciousness. That only through suffering could we improve our comprehension of the world around us a little more. Do you reject that?

NM: I can agree that suffering is, yes, a mighty educator, but it is also an immensely expensive one. Some learn a great deal from it; all too many are reduced if not destroyed. Suffering can maim more spirit than it creates. Some learn best by suffering through small stages, shifts in one's uglier habits. If, for example, you want to become a better man or woman, that might require not indulging greed.

ML: A form of suffering.

NM: A modest form. If I want something, and I can't have it, I may be suffering like a child. Whereas Dostoyevsky was referring to suffering at a level so intense that one had to wonder whether one could go on. Was existence worthwhile? Suffering of that order can become too intense.

Some people turn to suicide. And it can be true that a number do pass through such storms of the soul and come out on the other side not emotionally crippled, indeed have much to offer. But most are hobbled. Most have lost too much.

ML: Let me offer another theodicy, the "now and then." Evil and pain exist in this world, but only as a prelude to the afterlife. There, no pain will exist. So God offers a balance: Much suffering, pain and evil in this world, but in the other, there will be none. The scales balance.

NM: That is comparable to a man thinking, "I'm poor, but there will come a day when I am wealthy." Of course, the poor man has nothing to offer concerning the way and the means by which he will become wealthy. He has nothing but his hankering. By the same token, any notion that we will live in peace and beauty afterward may be naught but our need for future promises. Are we looking for good salesmanship. "You won't know what true happiness is until you buy this wonderful car. You'll come back and thank me for having sold it to you."

In the theodicies you've presented so far, there is always the assumption that God is in control of our fate from beginning to end. By my lights, theological misdirection rears up right at the commencement of the thesis. Anyone who looks even casually at the variety of incredible animals

who have come down through evolution (and/or Intelligent Design) has to assume that God may have said to Himself at a certain point, "This little animal, this macaw, is going to be the best of its species." Then, it turned out that it wasn't. So God moved on and made a better bird or made a better hedgehog, or a better pig. Then, man came into it and began in his turn to alter the animals. And often, improve them. (As we see every year on TV at the American Kennel Club.) Yet, the moment you accept a darker notion of existence—that is, live with the assumption there are hazards and perils added by the Devil, then God's effort becomes a contest where no one, human or divine, necessarily knows which side may win. Many might be ready to commit themselves to such a contest. In contrast, look at how our sense of challenge, is reduced if it is all happening to illuminate God's greater glory. Then, all we have to do is remain patient and pass through our suffering—because a happy ending is guaranteed. No! I much prefer the assumption of the Greeks that tragedy lies next to happiness, and both compose the staples of our existence. We can live with the hope that it may all turn out well, but such hope will be empty unless we are also prepared to live with a tragic outcome. We need to have the bravery to proceed, but in no way are we entitled to proclaim that a wonderful heaven is waiting for all

of us, and we need only keep our minds clean and, most preferably, theologically inert.

ML: The fourth theodicy is one of Maya. Illusion. This is how some deal with the question of evil. They say: what humans consider to be evil or suffering is either an illusion or it's unimportant. Events that are thought to be evil, such as death by natural disaster, are really not so. It could all be part of God's scheme. Eastern thought—Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism—take this stance. They do not engage the problem of evil. You are mistaken, they would claim, if you think it is really there.

NM: This argument could survive into the 20th century. Then, the Holocaust shattered it. Shattered it force majeure. The particular facts were so odious that they dictated the need for a different approach.

Contemplate the Holocaust, the gulags, the atom bomb. The mystery and the outrage of excessive human suffering is intensified by at least one order of magnitude. In consequence, the notion that evil is illusion grows offensive. Of course, Maya assumes that all of the "outside world," good, evil, and neutral, is illusion—wonderful, lovely outer events are as illusory as suffering. It's all Maya. But I must say I find that disagreeable. I suggest that we at our maximum are no more than the equal of any holy cow in any Hindu pasture. Indeed, the notion that all life is illusion is

comforting to the ethos of the upper classes of India. They can salve their bad conscience at the sight of the hideous poverty around them. It's all illusion they can tell themselves happily and most conveniently.

If you believe in karma as I do, believe not only in rebirth, but in subtle divine judgment (hopefully it is subtle) concerning the manner in which you will be reborn, another part of me remains sardonic and expects that God may have His or Her occasional bureaucratic problems operating the mechanics of reincarnation. If populations die at a steady rate with only a statistical spike here and there—a local earthquake, a terrible storm, a flood—God can receive and judge incoming souls. Forgive so crude a presentation of celestial mechanics, but it must serve for the moment. When reincarnation is flooded with a huge number of deaths that have no meaning—because they are abrupt, even near-instantaneous, without warning, and provide no opportunity to die with any grace, and so leave the victim bereft of awareness at the moment of their death—there to die marooned from any sense of why they now must die—then they enter reincarnation with less preparation within themselves. The most sensitive mortal anticipations may have been lopped off. It is worth repeating. I would argue that a sudden, unexpected death is much worse than death that

comes to one after a modicum of thought and fear and resolve and expectation. I believe there is a difference, and it may be profound.

So I think the Holocaust ravaged many human entrances into death. I also believe there may have been confusion in the heavens, even a celestial nightmare. Reincarnation was flooded with near to nameless dead.

ML: Was it so different from trench warfare in the First World War where they were killing 150,000 people in a week? Surely, that equals the rate of people being exterminated in the Holocaust. By the time the First World War was over, something like 30 million people were gone.

NM: I believe it's analogous, but not identical.

ML: So every time this has happened, like at the battle of Stalingrad, all of those. . .

NM: When you go into a battle like Stalingrad, you are, at least, aware that you may die. What was diabolical about the Nazi camps is that they were most careful not to prepare people for death. They did not state: "We are going to gas you today." On the contrary, they told the concentration camp inmates that since they were lice-ridden and filthy, they would receive showers. Courtesy of the camp. So, be so good as to undress. Those prisoners who were most obsessed with cleanliness, trooped happily into the gas chambers. A minute later, they were dying with fire in their lungs, and

screaming, "You lied, you cheated me." I am arguing that for a thousand people to die in a large room over one hideous instant of betrayal is to feel that God or someone on high betrayed them.

In contrast, the soldiers in Stalingrad knew there was a large chance they were going to perish. That, I would submit, offered less grievous problems to the powers of reincarnation than the gassings of the Holocaust. I repeat: it is so important to have a sense of why you are dying. I go so far as to believe that can prepare you for your next existence.

ML: Are you saying God was not able to accommodate many who were ready for reincarnation?

NM: What is basic in the universe? Certainly the laws concerning the conservation of energy—we know that you cannot do everything at once for everyone. All existence seems to be built on that set of proportions. So, to assume that God is in complete command of reincarnation is equal to assuming that He or She never suffers even a passing despair before huge, unforeseen disasters—indeed, why must we assume that God anticipates every event? Or is in command of every energy for every occasion? He or She created our world but that doesn't mean every oncoming situation was delineated in advance. Hardly so. History because of the ongoing actions of

God and the Devil is not often open to prediction. Before the future of history even divinities take pause.

ML: What happened, then, to those victims of the gas chambers?

NM: I would offer this speculation. I would say most of those who desired reincarnation did receive it, but in unsatisfactory fashion. This would derive from the argument I proposed earlier that the closest we come to heaven or hell is to encounter some angelic witty presence who decides how you are going to be reincarnated. And where. When God's wit is present, that is as close as you will get to heaven or hell, either the knowledge that you will have a better life or a poorer one at the start of your next life. But when the Creator is not functioning at His or Her best, but is too beleaguered, too extenuated, too despairing, too exhausted, then the choices are made for reincarnation can be deemed gross—there's not enough of God to go around. It is a way of saying the Holocaust deadened God's wit. Too much was happening at once. God, I will repeat once more, is not inexhaustible.

ML: I hear what you say, but why is it more difficult for God to assign a new birth to someone who died in the Holocaust than someone who died in the trenches? I don't see the difference.

NM: OK, let's put it this way—you have been a teacher. You certainly won't dispute the suggestion that you can walk into certain classrooms and

see that certain students are ready to learn, whereas others look lethargic. Some are eager to be in class and others are there because it is compulsory. So, I am saying that when you die with great bitterness in your heart, you are harder to reach. How does this not apply to reincarnation? I am now improvising outrageously, but allow me. Let us say, that the monitoring angel comes by, takes one quick look and has a sense of how the recently expired soul before him can prove strong here, weak there, and might well deserve to go to this rebirth or that. In normal situations, they can make quick decisions. But if the dead person's soul is in disarray, then it can be analogous to you deciding how to give necessary counsel to a student who has come into your room in fearful drugged-up condition. You don't necessarily know whether they should be assigned to a given class. I think this can carry over to what I'm talking about.

ML: Next one. The big picture, ~~this is~~ the fifth theodicy. God's divine plan is good. What we see as evil is not really evil. Rather it is part of a divine design that actually is good. Our limitations prevent us from seeing the larger picture. Certainly you'll grant that God envisions more than we do.

NM: Certainly.

ML: So things we think are a terrible tragedy turn out a year later to be positive experiences.

NM: Yes, the army. The worst experience of my life. And the most valuable. That's one thing. But to build a theological system on this theodicy may be excessively hopeful. It does not explain evil at all. It does not justify the Holocaust. The first person who can show me how the Holocaust was good for God's purposes will alter my thinking drastically.

ML: The great example is Judas. Judas was a traitor, a betrayer, yet he was absolutely necessary to God's plan. . .

NM: How do you know what God's plan was? You're taking the received wisdom of theologians who have been living with these enigmas for two thousand years and coming up with the answers that serve their respective needs. But what they conclude may have nothing to do with cosmic or earthly reality. In "The Gospel According to the Son" I concluded that two things happened because of the crucifixion. One: God lost to the Devil. Worse, he had expected to win. He thought Jesus was going to change humankind profoundly and immediately. He did not foresee the end. God, having so much to oversee all at once is not necessarily focused on what each one of His particular Creations is capable of. While I'm willing to assume that Jesus was His bold stroke, I would add that in chess when a really bold move is made and the player is not sure how it is going to turn out, you record it with an exclamation point plus a question mark. I would

172

say God's expectation for Jesus was both an exclamation point and a question mark. Then, like many another bold move, it did not turn out as expected. The Devil won—Jesus was tortured. At this point, God in His brilliance came up with an answer to the Devil. He gave us to believe that His Son actually died for our sins. What a human chord was struck! But to suggest that this was all planned in advance—crucifixion and resurrection—dubious. God may well have been responding to a crushing defeat with claims of half a victory. That makes more sense to me: God was re-writing the depths of what had happened after the events ensued—which is exactly what humans do all the time. We call it History. It is one of our fundamental activities. I suppose I even offer the assumption that God is not only like us in many ways but, indeed, He or She also has an ego to protect, that is, a necessary reservoir of confidence enough to keep striving.

ML: The next theodicy argues that evil is not the cause, but the consequence of people failing to observe God's will. Universal, reciprocated love would solve most of the problems that lead to the evils in the world.

NM: Well, let me go back to something I said earlier. God is searching for a deeper set of meanings in evil. Conceivably, God may feel that He does not understand evil all that satisfactorily. Evil has aspects that God's

understanding may not penetrate. My repetitive notion is that God, like us, seeks to learn. Maybe at the commencement, whatever form it really took, some vast deity, very far removed, said, "All right, new and most youthful deity, this will be your territory. Do what You can with it. If You can."

ML: That's a Gnostic idea.

NM: "And if You fail—well, it's happened to other deities. All the same, You are an artist, the best artist we have available just now for Your assigned part of the cosmos." Given this scenario, our young God soon discovers that He or She has a great deal to learn about evil. And is soon fascinated with evil.

ML: Well, you have a view of evil as a powerful, dynamic force.

NM: Yes, at the least I see evil as looking to destroy the part of the universe that we know—our world.

ML: Emerson said there really is no evil, just the absence of good. But that there are degrees of good, just as there are degrees of worth.

NM: Too easy. It enables us to go to sleep at night without pang or fear. But on the nights when one can't sleep, sometimes you can feel there's evil in the room, evil in your heart, evil in people around you—not all the time, but (rarely—thank God!) on those occasions when one's felt such a presence, you certainly cannot say that it is not really evil, merely a lesser

degree of good. Maybe Emerson never felt an incubus on his chest. He was, after all, such a fine spirit.

ML: Another argument: Evil is the consequence of God permitting humans to have free will. Human cruelty is the price of freedom. God gave us this freedom and He cannot interfere. Without the possibility to choose to do good or evil, humanity would be robots.

NM: That's the best single, strongest argument. But theologians wriggle out of it. They put God back in control by the end of the philosophical day.

ML: Well, yes, at the end of time, God does take over again. This is a testing time.

NM: Here is exactly where existentialism needs to rear up. Yes, God had to give us free will in order to find out about us. He could learn so much more about us provided we were given free will. But, of necessity, the door had to be left open to the Devil. This was a move done, perhaps—on a cosmic level—in fear and trembling. Yes, great fear because the final answer had to be left open. It was not free will unless the Devil had something like an equal opportunity to influence humans.

I would add that by now it is a tri-partite war. If it is only a contest between God and the Devil, and we are no more than the field on which it all takes place—some species of Astro-turf—then we still do not have free

will. We have to be equal as players to God and the Devil. That has to open a new kind of fear for us. Some could, in consequence, all go down to disaster. The usual supposition, however, is that God will finally be victorious, and, yes, we, His soldiers, will all go to heaven, a view held for centuries. No longer, however, I would say. Now, it is as if any one of these three forces can triumph. Many will now even conceive of a universe without God and the Devil. I don't pretend to know how to speculate on this. Let's say it is not inconceivable that man may become more and more powerful in relation to God and the Devil. If They have exhausted each other, we may even arrive at a point where it does become man and woman's world, our human's world.

ML: What would make that come about?

NM: Technology. It's obvious—well, obvious to me—that every effort is being made in these years to replicate a human being and, once done, forge armies of them. It might take two centuries but it does seem to be what we humans are hell-bent on doing. At that point, free will will have grown so large and so livid that it will be looking to replace God. I naturally, see that as absolutely disastrous. If I have been ready to question God's judgment on many a matter I am wholly reluctant to put any faith in our judgment. We are far from equipped to deal with the cosmos.

ML: Here is the last theodicy. The eighth. God is a righteous judge. And so people get what they deserve. If someone suffers, it is because they have committed a sin that merits such suffering.

NM: What if a divine balance has been disrupted? We had a different relation to existence ten thousand years ago. You had to hunt an animal down if you wished to eat meat. Now the beasts are brought to stockyards. Flesh for consumption is slaughtered in disagreeable fashion. Sows are kept in cribs so small they do not have room to move once they are fattened. The world of nature once lived on the basis that nearly everything contributed to the feeding chain. Add reincarnation, and the cycles of life and death were taken care of. This was the original conception. Today, as one example, the overlay of contemporary agribusiness has skewed it. In like fashion, the earlier human notion that excessive evil was compensated for—that if you were killed before your time, reincarnation could make adjustments—may no longer be operative. Yet it is still remains the only explanation I know for why many young soldiers are, when tested, ready to die in battle. I think they have a sense—comparable in some degree to the terrorists who are blowing themselves up—that they are going somewhere special. Right or wrong, this is their belief. It is a deep belief, indeed so profound that one cannot necessarily ignore the possibility that it is real.

But repeat this theodicy, would you?

ML: God is righteous. People get what they deserve.

NM: God does the best He or She can do. That doesn't mean people get what they deserve. If they did, the universe would be equal to a clock.

ML: Would you agree that it was inevitable once God gave us free will, and intelligence, that technology would follow?

NM: No. I am working against the tide on this one, but it could be that at a certain point God hoped and expected all of us would become psychic.

Great entertainers would be so intense in their art that men and women all over the world could experience the performance. Yes. Depending on how skilled and beautiful your senses had become, you could receive these performances, you could have people influencing other people at great distances. Of course, it did not happen. We looked instead for technological means of communicating. And that blunted the possibility of such fine senses. It helps to account in part for the near-mute, somewhat odd and wistful sense we acquire when we watch a world event on television.

ML: I would say that if you put people in a physical world, they are going to invent the wheel. And once they do, technology follows from that.

NM: No, sir. No, sir. Electronics has nothing to do with the wheel.

Electronics was one jump by mankind that God may have had nothing to do with.

ML: So when we went from a mechanical universe to an electronic universe—

NM: A leap not anticipated. Or such is my supposition.

Now most people who believe in reincarnation do expect that sooner or later they will reach enlightenment or some equitable resting place, and look back upon the problems and sufferings of earthly life as no more than way-stations on the journey. But I can't agree. I think reincarnation makes no sense if the end is foretold. I can't emphasize this enough. None of my arguments make sense if the end is known. I think it is precisely because the end is unknown that human terror sits at the root of every theology, as it has for millennia. It is so difficult for humans to accept the likelihood that this world is as open and undecipherable, as chaotic, as wayward, as playful, as perverse, as unexpected as, in secret, we fear it is. I think this is what has driven any number of theologians to the notion that it has all been foretold, that the end has been granted to us. But, such conclusions are not only philosophically untethered, even outrageous, but have gotten us into all sorts of trouble. Because a foreordained end narrows our lives, shrinks our

thinking, and tends to bring out the worst in us. We become addicted to quick judgment concerning others even as we cling to a partial optimism in which we only half-believe.

ML: In all these conversations we've had about the nature of God, your supposition has been that God makes mistakes, He is not perfect, He is much like us. But we know we have evil in us. There is evil in us as individuals, and as a race. And if God is so much like us, then God does indeed have evil in Him or Her. And that explains everything—you don't need a devil.

NM: No, no, no, no, I don't think that's it at all. God could have a little evil in Him and the Devil a great deal.

ML: Let's say it's 80/20. If God just has 20% evil, wouldn't that be enough to account for all the natural disasters and the Holocaust?

NM: But 80/20 is an assumption. What if it's 95/5 or 98/2? This sort of argument one can only grapple with in a novel. That might be interesting.

ML: There are theologians who take this position. They're called "open theists" and take the position that God is imperfect and has enough evil in Him—and the evil in God, coupled with the Devil, is responsible for the miseries of the world.

NM: Well, that could certainly be an answer, and if you want to respect the Old Testament as more than a great work of literature, but also as a document with some reality, you certainly have a Jehovah out there wreaking evil on a large scale as well as goodness. And it could be that God, being existential like us, was trying to reduce the amount of evil in Himself or Herself.

ML: By doing what?

NM: By Jehovah trying, for one thing, to get that prodigious temper under control. By daring to have a Son, a great attempt to improve matters. It may be that God was always trying for more, over and over, and often deciding, "No, this move won't work." It may be that after Christ's death, He had to decide if He wished to build the Catholic Church. And maybe the Devil was joining Him. It may be easier to comprehend the history of the Catholic Church if we assume that they were building this Church together and worked in collaboration, and with some considerable unhappiness, yes, God and the Devil built it together as most unhappy and embattled partners.

In other words, God may be out on an odyssey not unrelated to ours. He or She may get better along the way, but not succeed altogether.

ML: Are you saying that many human institutions can be the creation of both God and the Devil?

NM: Of course.

ML: Do you see any human organizations or institutions that are free from the taint of evil? Or are they all mixed?

NM: I think there's evil in everything.

ML: Baseball teams. . .

NM: You bet.

ML: Football. . .

NM: How not? [pause] One last thought. Earlier, you were advancing the argument that suffering is good for you. That submitting to God's will without complaint is virtuous. And this virtue will earn you all kinds of rewards. We will endure whatever God sends since that is our ticket to eternal bliss. Of course, if you dare to ask how a perfect God can make matters so imperfect, or worse, unjust, the only answer you can give is, "Do not presume to understand the mind of God." Right there, is the most dangerous single argument advanced by churchmen. It is exactly what drives people out of their faith because it tends to make faith brittle. Any time there is something you cannot comprehend, you are told, "It is beyond you—your faith has to carry you through this." So greater and greater spiritual loans are borrowed from faith. Sooner or later, and in so many, faith snaps. And people leave the Church, leave religion, cease to believe.

While "Do not presume to understand the mind of God" is the most-employed of the various explanations of evil, it is also, in its final effect, the most demoralizing.

I vote then, as is obvious, for an existential God who does not demand my unwavering faith, but prefers instead that we look to find, despite God's flaws and ours, a core of mutual respect as we set out together to attempt to create a viable vision that can lead us into the unforeseeable future out there with its galaxies, its light-years, its enigmas, and ultimately, let us hope, its availability. Perhaps the greatest gods of the cosmos are also on a search and may not be wholly indisposed to welcome Us.

INTERVIEW IX

ML: As we have agreed, the form of this interview will be a discussion on Gnosticism. I think this may even be the most natural way to conclude this book.

NM: That may be. But I have to recognize that although I have lived with that word in many a text over many a year, indeed even gave a full reading to Elaine Pagel's The Gnostic Gospels some years ago, I am still not comfortable with the term. I feel ignorant of its meanings in relation to what we have talked about.

One of the perils of bad memory from which I suffer is that one retains not nearly enough of one's serious reading. Growing old usually ensures that if you last long enough to reach your eighties, your memory will bear more resemblance to a bare wall than to a text.

ital

ML: Forewarned, forewarned. I came prepared. I would start by saying that you are hardly alone. Gnosticism is not a religious movement and it has been shunted pretty much off the face of the ideological earth.

Here are a few of the general traits: There is first, a disdain for authority and Orthodoxy which is opposed by a great belief in studying the self. The self is regarded as a phenomenon that you had to understand to some serious degree in order to attain larger knowledge. In this sense, the Gnostics were close to the Manichaens who were dualists, but not absolute about it. Like the Gnostics, they saw the body and the spirit as separate but mutually dependent. They were very taken with Jewish mysticism which of course had been present long before Christ, and so pre-date the Gnostics who seem to have come into existence around the second century B.C. and, indeed, in the beginning were an esoteric branch of Judaism. As you may recall from reading The Golden Bough, there were many competing sects at this time. But the Gnostics had great respect for Judaism while at the same time valuing the Greek belief in knowledge and self examination.

NM: My knowledge of Jewish mysticism is not profound, but I did some reading in the Kabbalah and the Zohar. Neither existed, however, at that point.

ML: No, although later, when the Kabalah did develop, the Gnostics were not opposed to it. They liked it. As they liked certain Buddhist texts—

NM: You're talking about a thousand years later.

ML: That's right.

NM: The Gnostics, in other words, continue well into the Middle Ages.

ML: Probably they end with the Inquisition.

NM: I thought the various uprootings of the heresies in the early centuries of Christianity took care of the Gnostics. Not so?

ML: It diminished them greatly. As I say, Gnosticism came into existence around the second century B.C. and built its ongoing strength by taking in Jewish strains, Christian strains, even Buddhist strains right up to the fourth century A.D. At that point the Christian church, especially under St. Augustine and St. Irenaeus, mounted a strong campaign against them using St. John as the point of their spear. Because St. John was a great believer in revelation, and the Gnostics were not, Augustine was another fierce opponent, and, of course, St. Irenaeus wrote five volumes against the heresy. Many of the tenets of Christianity, for example Original Sin, Resurrection, and Jesus as the son of God were later additions to Christianity. In the year 200, however, there was no sense of Original Sin and

Resurrection was barely an idea. The assumption that Jesus was God also came later. In good part, these ideas came in opposition to Gnosticism.

NM: Could you say that the first purpose of Original Sin was to forge a powerful weapon against the Gnostics?

ML: Yes. Gnosticism advocated individualism in search of enlightenment. It believed in reincarnation. It believed that all humans had some kind of divine spark. The spark may be trapped, impossible to free, one might be out of touch with it, but it was there.

NM: I agree with so much of this.

ML: I thought you might. It's no accident that the fundamentalists, to the extent that they know anything about Gnosticism, see it as a disreputable part of early Christianity, and best kept in the closet. If Gnosticism survives at all now, it may be among some sects who live on the border of Iraq and Iran-- the Mandeans, for example, are still there. The attribute to emphasize is that in Greek, *Gnosis* means "knowledge." *Gnosticos* is someone who seeks knowledge by searching the depths of the self, looking at the self as the available ground for enlightenment. When it came to the body, they were more divided. Some saw a division between the spirit and the flesh, some felt that the flesh wasn't important at all and therefore they

could go out and fuck themselves silly because it didn't make any difference.

Another branch of the Gnostics were purifiers. To the Zoroastrians, fire was holy because it purified. Water was holy. But they didn't believe in sex. Ergo, they died out. While Christianity became monolithic, Gnosticism divided. And that is another one of the reasons it didn't survive. Nor did it have an Augustine or an Irenaeus drawing everything together, and organizing a belief system.

NM. Well, I think it hardly matters whether it was a conscious move on the part of the early Church fathers, or an instinct, but I expect the Church fathers were certain that Christianity had to be absolute. Otherwise, it was not going to work. To hold together there must be no questions. Naught but answers. So the Gnostics were directly offensive to the Church fathers. It seems as if they certainly agree with what some of us are saying today: That there are no answers. There are only questions. The mark of a good society, a few of us might argue, speaking of a society that has not yet come into existence, is that you move from one set of questions up to a higher level of questions. Whereas, the early Christian philosophers founded their church upon the opposed conclusion. People must be given absolute certainty about life and death. Particularly about death. An absolute statement of Heaven and Hell was required. The notion of reincarnation was too

nuanced, too special, too elegant, too delicate, too possible. So, it had to be absolutely forbidden; and today, for fundamentalists, is still off the board.

I was reading Nietzsche's *Anti-Christ* a few days ago, and at a certain point he says, "All priests are liars." It's a marvelous remark because it happens to be not only daring but true. Whenever you speak with absolute authority about something that you cannot prove, the decision to speak with such authority means that you are ready to live as a liar. It seems to me that Christianity, because of its determination to be wholly authoritative, was able ultimately to create huge societies. Now, these huge societies work by half and by half they fail. Certainly, for centuries, they functioned well enough to limp along philosophically full of unanswerable questions, hideous inequalities, and clouds of mendacity, ready to sweep all unanswerable questions under a rug of absolute faith.

ML: Long before the Gnostics, it was taken for granted that there were many gods. This is certainly true of the Egyptians and of the Greeks. The Hindus believed in a variety of deities. The Africans reacted to all kinds of spirits high and low. It is as if Judaism and then Christianity came to a contrary conclusion; this plethora of gods did not serve their faith. It would be better for humans to believe there was one truth only.

NM: And one God. Which would of course explain the intensity of the early Christian attacks on the Gnostics.

ML: Yes, they burned their books, they expelled them, they killed them. You know, when they found the Gnostic Gospels in 1945 in Egypt, those were remarkable documents—third or fourth century copies of documents that went back to the time of Christ. Elsewhere they had been systematically burned and destroyed. But because of the obscurity of this hiding place, these scrolls had not been uncovered, and so it was a great revelation. Historical and Biblical scholars had always known about the Gnostics but mainly because Augustine and Irenaeus had attacked them. They never heard them speak for themselves. When they found the Gnostic Gospels, they discovered a completely different Christianity, one that did not embrace a monolithic God and had a host of negative feelings about the Old Testament and the intensity of rage and jealousy in Jehovah. We can ask: What was he jealous of? Maybe other gods. So the Gnostics became the losers in this huge struggle.

But you could see, at least personally I see in the narrowness and the Orthodoxy of Christianity from the time of Augustine on, how narrow is Christianity in relation to its roots. A hatred of the flesh, the concept of Original Sin, the insistence that

Jesus must be God. He cannot merely be God's messenger. And to counter such concepts, remarkable figures did come out of the Middle East—John the Baptist, Jesus, Mani, Zoroaster, Adonis, Dionysus, Osiris—incredible figures. From a Gnostic point of view they would all be messengers sent down to keep alive the spark.

NM: Wouldn't it also be an early attempt to understand the mechanics of existence? I would even say that this curiosity about the nature of God was seen by Judaism and Christianity as the great enemy. You cannot build a powerfully structured society so long as there are all too many ways to elaborate the details. The Judeo-Christian enterprise was determined then to become an absolute arbiter over the more mysterious elements of existence.

ML: And should there be a debate, it was to be resolved by the supreme leaders of the Church.

NM: Yes, do not look into yourself. Refer to your external authority.

ML: And so you could say that the final expression of this was in 1870 when the Catholic Church came up with the infallibility of the Pope. That was always implicit. But finally they now had to state it. It was the final consolidation of Papal power. When you think of the world that was in existence around the time

of the birth of Christ, you had two prevailing religious visions in the Middle East at any rate, the Greek and the Judaic. They were opposed to each other in a variety of ways and complemented each other in other ways. Christianity can be seen as the synthesis of many of those ideas.

NM: Wasn't Judaism more of a complete religion? On the other hand, Judaism was relatively small. To explain how a Christian sect of Judaism took over that much of the Western World in a few centuries it is necessary, I think, to assume that Rome was at the core of that development. If Rome hadn't existed one could suspect that Gnosticism might have continued. Gnosticism, after all, had to be congenial to many upper-class Romans. That would be my guess.

ML: Yes.

NM: It gave them a chance to explore themselves. When people are wealthy, they want to do just that. But there were other leaders in Rome who believed that Rome had to become the final answer to existence; Rome, and its government. Some even saw that with the aid of Christianity they could fortify authoritative government. Existence could be dictated from the top down. They could even overcome their own upper classes. So this becomes my assumption: It took the Romans to recognize that belief in Jesus Christ was going to be very good for

Rome. Immediately, however, this was far from happening. In the first centuries after Christ, Christianity softened Romans. Compassion, after all, was at the core of these new beliefs. Nonetheless, the fundamental Roman concept that it was vital to have an immensely powerful government at the top, did prevail. And Rome became the seed-bed of the idea in the Middle Ages that for society to exist, there must be absolute authority wielded at the center of the summit.

Perhaps without this Roman spur to centrality, our civilization could not have been built. In that sense, the authoritative lie, the New Testament, upon which Christianity was founded did create Western civilization—even if it took twelve centuries to reach the Renaissance. I expect it took so long because the lie implicit in this new theologically ordained faith, this respect for order from above, did present built in obstacles. The finest minds were obliged to believe in dogma. Their lives, after all, were at stake—which can account for the philosophical distances they traveled to make the illogic of faith palatable to themselves. Medieval philosophy became a study of the ways in which you can arrive at your desired end by the most special means of language that enable you to come out at the end with an affirmation of mighty oxymorons—as, for example, God is All-Good and All-Powerful, which, of course, violates not only our own experience

but our sense of history. All we can know or feel are intimations that something did create us. There is also our philosophical sense that it is far more difficult to explain our existence by the absence of a first cause than as the consequence of one. So, one can believe in God in the way of a latter-day Gnostic. Yes, it is not because of anything I read, nor anything I have been taught, certainly not because of what spiritual propagandists have been trying to put in my head all these years. No, I believe there is a Creator because that makes more sense to me. If there is not a God, then I cannot conceive of how our universe came to be. So I go on from there to say that if there is such a God, I have to assume that He or She is not perfect. Not on the aforesaid basis of one's own experience and the world's experience. With that, we stumble forward, blunder into further intimations of existence, not knowing whether there are forces in existence larger than our God. Quite possibly, there are. And, so the reason we are having these dialogues—and I cringe at the ongoing crudity necessarily inherent in such brusque presentation of such sensitive ideas. Nonetheless, it is what I can now offer. The reason we are having these dialogues is that I think fundamentalist notions of absolute authority have come to a point where they are destructive to live under, too excruciating intellectually to serve good purpose and too much of a manic faith-machine

capable of inspiring world disasters. There was a period, lets say, when without fundamentalism, there might not have been a civilization. That period is now gone. In our age those same ideas are choking us, distorting us, perverting and blinding us. Just turn on your TV and listen to televangelists yelling for faith and money. Their presence is so toxic that I feel ready to dismiss the eloquent and exceptional rationale of the best theologians and philosophers. I have to add that their need to justify the very improbable propositions that make the televangelists possible, also makes the same best theologies go through excruciating intellectual gymnastics. Embarking on an immense error demands huge powers of development in the brain of the person who is working on that vast error. Even though they fail ultimately (and so egregiously that we have had to pay for their failures through the centuries) nonetheless, the powers of human ratiocination have been increased. That is part of the perversity of philosophy. Working with an illfounded thesis can also improve one's ability to debate.

ML: So I guess from what you've said you now understand why here and there in commentary on your work people will say, "Oh, Mailer, he's sort of a Gnostic."

NM: Well, yes, now I do understand. Not that it matters. I just want to accomplish something with these dialogues. Normally, you are not supposed to

talk about religion unless you know a good deal about it, and then you are still wise to say little. But I have proceeded to ponder these questions without being qualified. Yet, my basic argument is that of course I am qualified all the same. We all are. That is why I can say yes, if you want to get down to it, I probably am a Gnostic in the sense that the inner feeling I have about these matters is so clear and so acute to me. I certainly do feel ready to talk about it. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that oxymorons pollute the mind, and the Great Oxymoron—All Good and All-Powerful—is the most virulent of them all—which is equal to saying that modern-day fundamentalism is poison to the human spirit.

ML: Whereas Gnosticism now indicates the road to take?

NM: Perhaps we can now afford to be Gnostics. In their early Christian time, the fundamental wisdom of human beings may have been: “We need order. We do not need stimulation. We do not need thought that is lively and novel and new. We need order. We need command from above.” That was a stage in human existence. It was much like the stages of existence that children pass through where they must live under order at a certain point or nothing holds their behavior together.

ML: You’re talking like a Hegelian now.

NM: Well, I don't care about the labels. I think we are at a stage of development where Gnosticism may serve us better.

ML: I can imagine how you as a new Gnostic must think about corporations *too*.

NM: Well, we don't have to go there. Right now, I much prefer to wander through the forests of theology than the quicksands of economics.

Let me conclude, however, by thanking you for the order and stimulation you brought to this theologically ignorant mind.

~~NO~~
NO
It's

PRAYER

ML: Here's a question on ritual. It will introduce us to the question of prayer. All your ideas, I would say, have an underlying assumption that God has a continuing, even a profound interest in some individuals, and certainly in the ultimate fate of the human species, flora and fauna and the rest of His creation. This is completely at odds with some of the earliest recorded religious expression, namely from the Sumerians, whose prayers were always begging the gods to "Remember!" Prayer and ritual were a constant attempt to engage the attention of forgetful and indifferent gods who had created but had abandoned humanity. This, by the way, wasn't a notion emerging from disasters and dislocations but could be found even as their civilization flourished. Can you comment?

NM: It's the other half of the equation. The obverse side of prayer is that it rarely gets answered. So rarely, indeed, that people at religious meetings

cite such events as formidable. Answered prayers are as seen as often as miracles. Prayers are not usually answered. Isn't that because prayers rarely receive a clear response? But then I think of the Lord wading through an avalanche of prayers: "Oh, God, let my team win the game!" "Oh, God, let me get some money. Let me sell this old heap that's no good and get something with spoke wheels."

I don't think God listens to prayer. The Sumerians, as you describe them, were relatively sophisticated people who recognized that they might pray but answers did not come often.

Now let's suppose some people have a child who's ill, and they pray to God with great sincerity asking, begging for their child to live. I'm willing to accept the effort as not something to sneer at. I won't say it works humanly speaking, but we can certainly feel for the parent.

ML: When you were talking about Gandhi, you said: "There are a few oxymorons that are vital and immensely valuable. One of them is "heroic passivity." One's wisdom has to become the arbiter then. We can be encountering heroic passivity, or only the quasi- heroic variety and the latter might be a disaster." Along that line, what would you say about the contemplative life? By that I mean the cloistered orders who don't run hospitals or schools, just pray for the world. This is a strong Christian

tradition, ditto for the Buddhists and some Hindus, and probably Hasidics engage in some variant of that. Do you see a value in this kind of passivity?

NM: I would answer yes. I'm not opposed. If we're going to come nearer to God, to find a sense of God behind the words; it's perfectly conceivable to me that the deity of whom I speak does pay attention to transcendental sincerity. I have a crude analogy to offer. Occasionally, after having worked on a novel, you come across a review that's so intelligently written and gets so close to what you were attempting to do, or, even better, offers insights you did not arrive at by yourself that your work is illuminated. Such a critic makes me feel better about the act of writing. So, do I also think that there are people who contemplate existence, who pray in depth to God and are qualified to do so. They are not petty. What I hate about prayer is that so often it is superficial and greedy. Most of the time it is looking for an undeserved advantage: I'm kind of stupid, God, but maybe you'll help me because I'm praying to You. They do it as if modesty is the only passport needed.

ML: This is about Buddhism: what's your take on the Buddhist notion of the bodhisattva vow? Reaching nirvana is a catch-22—if you have achieved a level of deep compassion, enough to reach nirvana, you can't go happily off into it while other sentient beings are still here struggling and suffering.

So, even though you personally have a free-pass out of this far from perfect world, you voluntarily reincarnate as a "bodhisattva"—a helper, a teacher, a guide to the way—and keep reincarnating until everyone has achieved nirvana. Devout Buddhist lay people of many persuasions, and all the monks and nuns, take the "bodhisattva vow" at an advanced stage of their training.

NM: It's a beautiful notion. The difficulty I've always had with Buddhism, however, is not bodhisattva, but nirvana. As I see it, the point of existence is not to rise above our petty feelings and leave them behind, but on the contrary, to be able to struggle with those petty feelings in such a way that we lift them into more vigorous feelings. Nirvana always struck me as a place I had no interest in reaching. Whether it existed or not—I had no idea—it did not appeal. I remember talking to a friend of mine who's a good Buddhist and I soon fell into a polite rage. Over just a few drinks! "You Buddhists always talk about nothingness, at how to arrive at nothingness," I told him, and added, "As writer, I can tell you, I live with nothingness every minute I'm working. I sit at my desk and for the first half hour there's nothing—I have to pass through such nothingness in order to come to a few ideas. You're not really talking about nothingness. Nothingness is an awful

state! It's so empty a state. Why don't you talk about what it really is you are looking for which is the ineffable?"

I hope he was struck with the thought, even if only by a little.

Back to the bodhisattva: I would say again it's a noble conception.

Whether true or not, is another matter. But it is a beautiful notion.

ML: At the end of your last interview, you said that in many ways the Creator might be comparable to a Greek god—strong yet not all powerful, flawed but noble, well, you know Greek myths are full of incidents where the gods took human form, or animal form. Apart from the well-known stories of Zeus turning up as this or that personage to impregnate some human woman, there are also stories of Zeus turning up as a beggar. In one story, peasants take in a wretched beggar overnight, share their far-from abundant meal with him, treat him very well, and next morning, find his bed empty and a sack of gold in his place—Zeus came calling, and rewarded them for their kindness to the poor! God showing up on earth is an idea embraced long before Christian theology.

NM: I don't see any need to answer the question. I just take it for granted.

If God wants to appear as a human, why not? And indeed, He would. But I think what's more interesting is the belief that if you're good when you don't have to be good, something favorable can happen. Which I think is also part

of human nature. Humans live for revenge—but they also live for the belief that we are capable of goodness. For me, the brunt of these stories, is the human desire involved. I want to be capable of goodness and indeed I would also wish to believe that there is something in the universe which will reward you for goodness. Prayer, I would argue, is all too often the stepchild of that emotion.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

BEGIN NEW EDIT HERE.

ML: I want to go back to a crucial point. Earlier you said you doubted the efficacy of prayer because all too often they were requests for personal gains or status; money, a job, a new car. But do you give enough purchase to the huge number of people who pray for guidance or forgiveness or for strength to avoid sin. These types of prayers may exceed the greedy type. Who could say?

NM: I would agree. Let us even assume they do exceed it. My point is that God may not pay great attention to most prayer. Think of it as an immensely abused communication system which is overwhelmingly present in human affairs. I would suppose that God can pick up human messages

without the need for prayer. I will admit that a prayer can have, on occasion, such vibrancy that God is cheered by it. But I would also say that most prayer is wasteful, and self indulgent, An exercise in narcissism. Over the years, I've heard so many people say, "I'm praying for you." My reaction is, "I don't need it. It's not helping. You're just invading my presence."

Often it is no more than another petty human weapon. It could be well intended. They do care about you, they want to do the best they can for you. But do they really need to pray to make their feelings legitimate? If they love you, then you are probably going to reap a benefit whether they try to talk to God or not.

ML: How so?

NM: Through the warmth you receive from them. The honest warmth of their feeling rather than the oratorical "I'll pray for you."

ML: You feel then that prayer tends to be meretricious?

NM: That may be too strong a word. How about over-subscribed to?

Ninety percent of prayer may not necessarily lead to anything. I think a lot of people pray in order to intensify their sense of focus. They are doing it for themselves. What I don't like about prayer is the enormous baggage that goes with it, the stultification of society that is shored up by prayer; the number of mediocrities who pray for something that they know nothing

about. You can see humungous examples of that on television every night, crowd-rousers invoking the holy efficacy of prayer while seizing every false advantage they can find—including, how not?—quick appeals for money.

ML: Static.

NM: Worse. I think the interception of prayer may be one of the Devil's most powerful instruments. Whenever a prayer is offered that is lacking whole integrity, the Devil may know how to profit from such shoddy work.

ML: Many religious people find solace in praying together. They believe that group prayer, at a religious service or in a group of people, is a more efficacious way of reaching the Lord. Now, the Lord may be too to pick up a single cry for intercession, but he can hardly neglect a full house of prayers from, say, St. Peters, led by the pope on the Son's birthday. Quantity changes quality as you are forever saying.

NM: There is no question in my mind that St. Peter's would attract God's attention. Still, we must enter into the nature of the communal prayer. For example, right now, a war is being waged between Islam and ourselves. If there is a particular phenomenon that characterizes Islam it is how they pray together five times a day. They put their forehead to the ground, they raise

their buttocks towards heaven and they pray. And we in the west look down on it. We tend to consider that kind of excessive. Moreover, we don't necessarily believe that Allah is well intentioned. To us, he is an alien God. So, the fact that a number of people get together for such prayer, and have a community of opinion doesn't make them appear virtuous to us. For that matter—change of venue!—when a theater audience laughs as one, does that have any relation to prayer? To feel that one is part of a great group of people is reassuring regardless of the occasion. But whether prayer is beneficial is quite another matter. All over America there are now prayers to Christ for our soldiers in Iraq, whole communities praying that our soldiers don't run their Humvees over terrorist's explosives. Of course, you've also got Islamics praying just as powerfully and just as intently that their enemies will be wiped out by the same explosive.

ML: Why not also say that the people at St. Peters, may be praying for us to get out of that war.

NM: All right. Exactly. Some are. And I can believe there is a collective telepathic power that humans can have. With a thousand people together, or ten thousand, yes, the effect is magnified. But to assume it is magnified to good purpose is a very large assumption. It could as easily be magnified to an evil one. Usually it is intensified to a complex but not particularly

pertinent aim. Humans are skewed away from the point all the time.

America spent close to fifty years believing that Russia was the evil empire while all the time that ugly, cruel place was getting weaker and weaker and growing worse and worse as it became less capable of destroying us. For the last two decades of the Soviets, ^W_e never saw them for what they were, a constipated commerce-locked economy, an over-ordered society, slow in development, and in relation to us, as boastful as it was empty. Its secret desire was to rise to some beginning of economic equality with us. They lacked the inner wherewithal to believe they could destroy us, and all the while our anti-Sovietism served the needs of the American power-seekers. We kept the American public afraid of the Soviets long after it may have been justifiable. By the end they were not the Evil Empire but the Wretched Kingdom.

ML: We were praying against it too. Praying for its collapse.

NM: We weren't praying for its collapse. We were hoping that when a war came we would destroy the Russians before they would destroy us.

ML: But when we read in the newspapers about what was going on in Russia in the seventies and eighties and how grim it was, I'm sure a lot of people were saying, "The Lord is bringing the Russians to their knees."

NM: Well, now, you have a great many people saying, "mā will bring Islam to its knees." Islam is saying, "Allah will bring Satan to its knees." The notion that a country is holy or evil, I find offensive.

ML: Right. Even in the Islamic world we know there is such a chasm between the Sunnis and the Shiites. Their detestation of each other is profound.

NM: They certainly outdo the old animosity between the Catholics and the Protestants.

ML: You've spoken about dreams being a contested field. That is, Divine and Demonic forces use dreams to send their messages to humans. If this is true, why can't God and the Devil also communicate their messages to a mind seeking a line of communication with something transcendental. I assume you believe that humans can pray to the Devil as easily as the Lord.

NM: Unwittingly. Let me put it this way: I think people who believe in the Devil have ceremonies that are not exactly prayer—but more like communion with invocations. There may be a fundamental concept among in magical groups that you don't reach the Devil by praying to him or her.

You invoke him or her. *I would say that the tendency*
~~Whereas in Christianity, certainly, the notion that~~
~~in Christianity, all exceptions noted, is to~~
~~you undertake a ceremony to invoke God is considered dubious at best. The~~
~~pray to God rather than invoke him~~

~~only place it occurs is in the Mass during the substantiation of the wafer and the wine. Other than that, you pray to God, you don't invoke Him.~~

Can we discuss

ML: Does your belief in Karma have anything to do with your less than enthusiastic feelings about prayer?

NM: I think I would say that if you live a life which is a little better, a little braver, a little more compassionate or responsible than what was expected of you, you may well be taken care of in your rebirth. This assumes that a foul-up in communication does not occur in reincarnation, but of that one can hardly be certain. In any event, let me argue that attention to one's Karma is a grand substitute for prayer, a real and legitimate and profound substitute for prayer. Nonetheless, I can see exceptional cases where a prayer is so beautiful and comes out of such depth in a human and has such inner resonance that divine attention is paid. But, I think such prayers are as rare as the work of a fine artist. Let me add that you don't have to be an educated person to have a beautiful prayer. Such a prayer comes out of the depths of your experience and shows a hard-earned balance of perception and passion, of forgiveness and true human need. Such elements can form an exceptional unity. We can understand a parent praying for the health of a sick child and find it honorable, and true whether the prayer is heard or not, honorable because of the intensity and focus of the love.

ML: You are arguing then that if prayer is to be efficacious or to be heard at all it has to be all of those things you said, whole, pure and free of cynicisms.

NM: And best of all—free of buried motive, of motive that is concealed from one's self.

ML: The saints can also be addressed in prayer.

NM: For Catholics.

JML: For Protestants too.

NM: It seems to me that Catholics have about five times as many saints as the Protestants. Is that true?

ML: Well, they do have a lot of saints. ^{Best} There are many that Episcopalians and Lutherans will recognize. Obviously, if there is a heaven and there are as many people up there as Christians think there are, untold numbers of saints are to be found in heaven. However, to know for certain that someone is in heaven, that's the definition of a saint.

NM: Among Catholics? Literally?

ML: Literally. And Protestants too. I'm certain. So when you say, "Oh, he was a saint." Well, you'd say, "how do you know?" So when the Church says, this person is a saint...

NM: The Protestant's saints as well?

ML: Oh, yes.

NM: Who are the Baptist saints?

ML: I think among fundamentalists you almost never hear about saints.

NM: Jesus is the all-purpose saint for Baptists. God, Archangel, Saint, law-giver, cheer-leader and coach all in one. I suspect that the mental and spiritual benefits some good honest people receive from referring in their thoughts to a particular saint comes because that helps to bring some kind of focus to their problem. Yes, thinking about saints helps them to focus. That is one more reason that the church didn't last two thousand years for too little but, not being a Catholic, I feel equally that the distortions of existence which accompany Catholicism are immense. I am not, however, going to say that the Church has not been good for a good many people in a good many ways, yet it has also stomped upon human imagination. So I would go so far as to say that Catholicism ultimately may be stultifying to God. And is half possessed by the Devil. I would say as much for any other established religion. I don't need Catholicism to be the villain. All organized churches and synagogues are, in that sense, obfuscations to separate us from a closer sense of the nature of God.

ML: But you have talked about God's involvement in some of the great religions over the years.

NM: How not. How not? What about the Devil's involvement? Is God to allow him sole occupation of the altar? And the congregation? There they are, fighting it out in all the alleys and places of religion. There is not a seminary in the world of whatever persuasion where you don't have God and the Devil working day and night right down into the acolyte's genitals—the temptations, the agonies, the repressions, the wonders. How many fine seminarians have to wonder finally whether they are working for God or the Devil? Can one even be a fine seminarian without some concern over that?

ML: To conclude—can you begin to explain why so many people do pray?

NM: The act is obviously cleansing for a good many. It requires some concentration on what is one's greatest need at the moment and what might be one's greatest hope. It can encourage modesty in men and women who are vain, and perhaps even inspire courage in a few. Prayer can also enable one to come closer to what is most awful in oneself. Prayer can offer the only solace available when grief is overwhelming. All of those positive elements can be present. What I distrust, however, is the notion that prayers will certainly be heard on high and thereby will prove efficacious. Believe in that as a fact and one is back in the depth of century-old superstitions that left our minds circling endlessly around the same empty intellectual places.

It's a mystery, so don't think about it. Be philosophical!

LAST PAGES

To shift the course of this discussion, there are some remarks I have been thinking about for some time with which I would like to conclude. Part of the interest I've had in theology has been political. If I pose the question—what kind of political system would God like, I'm not convinced God is certain. In different times, the heavens may have been partial to Monarchy, to Communism, and certainly the Lord was interested in Democracy, in Capitalism. (As was the Devil!) These systems are not without comparison to the designs of God's animals. Which ones turn out best? I think a great deal was put into Communism at one point. However, I also have this

notion that the Devil is at war with God, so, even as Communism ended badly, democracy could end badly. It's why I speak of an existential God.

You may ask: Where is the positive element in all this? And why politics? How can that give us a sense of beauty, awe, or even a feeling that we might want to be nearer to God? What do people like me believe in this vein? What are my positive intimations of God as a political presence?

Well, I do believe there are elements of compassion in our world, elements of goodness. It is not difficult to believe that love is more of a life-giving force than hate. The majority of us are working, after all, to create a world where there is reasonable equity. What political form could that world take?

If we start with the brilliant arguments of writers as great as Nietzsche, we would have to argue that it is wrong to pay great attention to the weak, the poor, the hungry, the meek, the mediocre, the inferior. They are, Nietzsche declares, a prodigious dead-weight upon existence. Filled with hatred, they wish to destroy all that is noble or aristocratic, beautiful or fine. It is a sustainable argument—Nietzsche is probably the most talented and powerful conservative of them all. Yet, as a thesis, it only goes so far before it crashes, and that is for a very simple reason. The aristocracy was corrupt, as were the theologians and the oligarchs of capitalism. Conservatism is as

doofless
see
p. 30
"Intelligent
Design"

filthy in its practices as its left opponents. If the poor are malodorous, so are the rich. And the rich have advantages that the poor do not have.

On the other hand, even at its best, Socialism has never worked too well. Why? Because it refuses to live with the notion that God exists and is part of the human balance. So a built-in paradox intrudes on what was conceived as an open equitable system. It is that the majority of leaders who come to power under socialism do not believe in the existence of God and are soon engaged in personal competitions, rivalry, and finally the over-riding impulse to be the sole leader—yes, who will have the prevailing ego? My feeling, then, is that to advocate socialism without some existential sense of religion in the foundation itself, is to make a profound error. The beauty of Christ—what Christ was saying to all of us—is that the poor have as much reason to exist as the wealthy. I don't want to oversimplify Nietzsche's argument, but finally he did feel that Christ was not only speaking to the unwashed but arousing a great rage in them, and this rage would yet destroy all that was first-rate in civilization. I would argue that unless we have some real understanding of the needs of the poor, and the rights of the poor, plus the passion of the poor to become more than they have been condemned to be for generations, we are only looking to bypass the horrors of society. So I say that socialism without belief in an existential God cannot offer as much

to human illumination. Whereas socialism accompanied with belief in a God who wants much of what we want, can liberate society for us. So I suppose that if a socialist society should ever prevail with a belief in an existential God, I think we might begin to find some more developed stirrings of human equity. Let me say, since I have a great distrust of large organizations and monumental government power, that I also think small business must be a viable part of any existential socialism. Let the largest organizations be socialist rather than corporate. Because the corporations cannot be trusted. The corporation is—I've called it the Big Empty. The corporation is psychopathic. It does not care about its past, it has very little interest in its previous history; it has very little interest in its future.

ML: It does have an interest in its future.

NM: Things are done without looking to the long future. For example, outsourcing is an immediate way of making profits. They have to show a profit every year, just like the psychopath has to feel that he and his ego are larger today than yesterday. Otherwise, they will go into a depression. By contrast, under existential socialism, it would be natural to have an interest in the past and the future. The idea: You don't look for huge profits, but for the gradually increasing well-being of all, the ongoing enrichment of culture. To keep such socialism alive, small business has to be encouraged, and the

comes
earlier
7
check

notion of community, of neighborhood. For small business may be more innovative than socialism, more on a par with inventors, artists, gamblers, and adventurers and teachers, more in proportion to the scope of human wit. Whereas the concerns of corporate management are for power and profit, exceptional overweening profit for the top.

Behind an existential socialism with an open regard for small business lies the idea that we might even be working with God. Not working to obey Him, to praise Him, to slave for His vanity, but on the contrary, to live with the idea that God does share desires with us, that we are at last working together, yes, finally, after millennia of hatred of God, beseechments of God, intense if mindless prayer, sloughs and promontories of ritual, attempts to take God by inquisitorial force, attempts to do without God, attempts to glorify Him at the expense of all reason, there might be at last an agreeable sense that, yes, we are working with the deity, and he is working with us. If we don't understand God in large part, God in turn, doesn't understand us altogether. Yet, we might even develop the beginnings of a real regard for each other. So, one would postulate a society built on the religious notion that God needs us as much as we need God, and I would say that does offer more promise than the ongoing over-inflated managerial ethic of corporate capitalism so ready to declare that when what we suspect—somewhere in

our souls—is that the exact opposite is more likely to be true. Greed is Good, and the Free Market is Valhalla.

END