

hand, the premise behind these interviews, is that I won't be embarrassed by my lack of knowledge. Theologians—no matter at what high level they cerebrate—are trapped into their received religious systems. They are obliged to do their thinking with ideas they are not free to change. (As, for our most famous example, God is All-Good and All-Powerful.) So theologians build the innovations in their philosophies by way of mental gymnastics. And, no surprise, they avoid many questions they cannot begin to confront.

The tsunami comes to mind. All they offer for explanation here is that God is a great mystery and His ways are unfathomable. They are hiding behind the "Mystery" one more time—let us say for the twenty-eighth thousandth time.

My feeling, as is obvious from these interviews, is that God strives to find a better, more well-adapted creation than His latest design. Remember my remark that the dinosaurs, at one point, may have been a large part of God's elan. He had dared to create this immense animal who might be able to rule the jungles, the mountains, and the plains. Then, He came to discover that He had misdesigned it. Back to the drawing board. God, like us, makes mistakes. I must say that if Intelligent Design is being welcomed by fundamentalists, they are asking for considerable trouble in the future.

ML: Well, I don't want to say they invented the idea. It's been around since the 18th century when the world was conceived to be virtually a clock, it was so perfectly designed. Intelligent Design grows out of the Enlightenment.

NM: Perhaps I have a misunderstanding of what is meant by Intelligent Design. I can only speak of it on the basis of a little reading. Does it not speak of a concept that offers the notion that there is a presence in existence which introduces a sense of more advanced design into evolution? I do deem this to be perfect for what I am talking about. Because, yes, I do think that God is always looking to make existence better, more finely designed. And in corollary to that, God looks to improve on His errors.

ML: Can't you see how such ideas can lend support to people opposed to evolution? Intelligent Design shows the hand of the Creator.

NM: Yes, but that doesn't make Him an All-Powerful divinity.

Fundamentalists have no understanding of an artist. As they see it, the Creator saw it all at once, did it perfectly (in a week) and brought it out. Lo and behold, it's been perfect ever since. He never failed once. The design was extraordinary from the start.

ML: Here is what I understand to be the position of present-day Intelligent Design. It would say: we don't know exactly which processes of natural

selection, mutation, evolution, are directly related to the Intelligence used to create the world, but we are saying that what does exist out there in nature speaks of the presence of an Intelligence behind it at some level—maybe at some removes back, but it is certainly opposed to those fundamentalists who would say God created the world in one instant six thousand years ago.

Intelligent Design people do say that evolution cannot explain all the appearance of design that we see in natural life. Intelligence had also to be involved.

NM: It certainly makes great sense to me that Intelligent Design is one of the elements in evolution. What I find comfortable, even agreeable about it as a notion, is that if we do have a God who created a universe as manifold as ours—how indeed could it have been done without Intelligent Design, without having notions that this is where to go here, this is how to fix that, here we can develop this species, right there is what is wrong with that species. The other element present, which I must emphasize over and over is that if God is not all-powerful, His creations went out into an existence that didn't necessarily receive them with generosity. In many circumstances, God might well have to say to Himself or Herself, "I didn't anticipate this."

ML: Tectonic plates. . .

NM: Exactly. How much simpler to assume God didn't expect that disaster. He was aghast.

ML: Or, to engage the argument, the tectonic plates are just another example of the randomness and the chaos of the universe.

NM: But, the artist works to extract order from chaos. I would not even say that chaos is a lack of order. Chaos is a mix of sets of orders that are too complex and too disparate to be ordered within the onlooker's consciousness. If you will, each element in chaos can have its own set of laws and processes, but that organization comes into conflict with another set of orders and they are incompatible. They tear each apart. I also would postulate Malign Design occurring throughout our universe. By which I would posit forces not at all congenial to God's concepts of creativity. How do I arrive at this? Because nowhere in existence do you find a free ride. Anything that comes along which seems wonderful in the beginning, meets opposition, enjambments. Sooner or later a forward motion is paralyzed, stunned, hindered, or stopped.

ML: Do you then espouse a theory of Intelligent Design that has imperfect design?

NM: The design can be excellent until it runs into chaotic elements that could not be anticipated.

ML: That's imperfection.

NM: Perfection may not be the best word to use here. Sometimes you see creatures in the universe who are so exquisitely designed that the moment one speaks of Intelligent Design, you say, of course! Orchids, snow flakes, tigers. Evolution, by trial and error, could not have produced some of the beautiful forms we see in the animal world. Race horses. Certain dogs. Even if we find most insect forms repellent, nonetheless, when we look at them under the microscope, we can see the extraordinary work that went into them. It becomes harder to believe that evolution said, "yes, the six pincers on this particular leg will have curves as wonderful as scimitars because this is the only way this species can survive." It is easier to believe that the limb was designed for beauty as well as for function.

ML: You know the old cliché. You put a million monkeys in a room with a million typewriters—eventually one of them will produce War and Peace or Hamlet.

NM: Go to a computer for that. The number is too vast to be interesting.

ML: Let me give you another refutation of Intelligent Design. —

NM: I'm listening.

ML: In the vastness of the universe, there are billions of stars and solar systems and galaxies. By our limited knowledge, of the ones we've looked

at, not one comes close to having the basics to design a universe—that is, the water and rain, the flora and fauna that went into creating our amazing, organic system that has been able to work together over a period of time. There's nothing like that anywhere else that we can see in the universe. Couldn't it be we're just a statistical fluke of the cosmos? In so vast a universe with so many possibilities, finally there is one planet that developed out of the equivalent of mega-billions of monkeys pounding out Hamlet.

NM: But I would call that an argument for Intelligent Design. Because we find nothing elsewhere that works like anything on earth—all the fineness of detail we have here—I see that precisely as a powerful argument for Intelligent Design.

ML: What then is the function of all the other stars and galaxies?

NM: All we can say with any authority is that in our solar system, the earth seems to be the only planet that is now alive with creatures. So it may be that other gods—conceivably gods more powerful than ours—have had even larger failures. It is possible that the earth succeeded in accomplishing something other planets were unable to do. Given the limited powers of astronomy today, there seem to be no near galaxies that are comparable. But there may be. There very well may be. There are so many possibilities.

All we can begin to say is that it seems reasonable to posit a god for our universe.

ML: For our solar system.

NM: For our solar system. It may be that this God failed with other planets.

Prior to the earth. I won't even begin to approach that. It's too easy and too fanciful. I will say that it is far more difficult to conceive of our existence if o God does not exist. Because then we are back to the monkeys writing

Hamlet and that is hard to believe. It is much easier for me to suppose that

Hamlet is a part of human design. And if it's not, if it did take a nano-trillion of monkeys to produce an equivalent of Hamlet, what a waste.

There has to be the assumption, along with everything else, that existence is moving toward a goal. It is certainly possible that existence itself in the deepest, most cosmic, sense, is in peril. Of necessity, therefore, it is moving forward. It is as if we will have a rendezvous with extinction if we do not reach a certain period or place by a given time, as if indefinables have to be achieved in order to protect the continuation of this existence.

This is what I would term reasonable paranoia. By which I mean one can try to think about it without diving into dire declines or flaming into manic outbursts. But if there is some reason to this last assumption, then Intelligent Design is a crucial part of it.

ML: Fine. I want to take a chance with this discussion. I want to take a flyer, so to speak. You tell us that if you think at all like a philosopher, it is because you have been a novelist all your life. Splendid! I want to see what you can do with a parallel that's apparent to me. Novelists, after all, create worlds.

NM: We do try to, at times.

ML: Good. Let's take the notion of Intelligent Design in relation to the novel.

NM: Well, as I did say before, true artisans like Henry James and Hemingway gave themselves over entirely to design. It's as if their works were designed to live entirely by themselves. Perhaps, as creators, they felt less need to look for support in the breath and raw facts of existence.

ML: All right. Let me take another leap. Is there any relation between your assumption that Intelligent Design is confronted and altered by existence and your disdain for plot in your novels?

NM: That's a good and challenging question. Before I get into it, let me say a word or two about James Joyce. Unlike Hemingway and Henry James who are not only great novelists and avatars of Intelligent Design so pure that their works, once designed and fashioned, tend to live by themselves, Joyce, to the contrary, plays at the very edge of chaos. Which is why it is

very hard to get near to Joyce. A common reflex is to look to avoid all that.

But Joyce did undertake to organize whole areas of chaos.

ML: I don't want to lose my point. In many essays, many interviews, you have said in effect, I don't worry about plot. Plot is much less important to me than character. You always have a storyline, but your plots are not. . .

NM: They're not clockwork.

ML: No. So I've wondered if for you to have a plot that is neat and tight and ordered would run counter to your ideas of metaphysics.

NM: Good. Plot, if you will, is Intelligent Design. It is interesting to me—and I thought about it a lot in the years I wrote Harlot's Ghost because the CIA is a perfect example of plot, that is, Intelligent Design, coming into contact and conflict with the world. The reason I don't like plots to prevail is that they don't allow the figures in the book, the characters, to push the limits of wholly pre-designed plot to the point where life rejects the plot because life finds the plot unacceptable, and so throws the design into another set of conditions no longer as definable.

Borges is the brilliant model of this process. Borges wrote five and six page short stories that start with incredible plots. Then the plots get shattered. All in five or six pages. Incredible stories. He, like Joyce, was fascinated with making attacks on the nature of chaos. Borges showed us

for all time—talk about a novelist's novelist! He said to us: "Look at what you're all doing. You take yourselves too seriously. You miss the fact that once a plot is shattered, life still goes on. Another species of life begins and you have to deal with it."

Take this back to Intelligent Design. God looks for Intelligent Design. Then that Intelligent Design gets itself worked upon by existence. The Wright brothers designed an airplane. Don't we know that! And after they got it up in the air for the first time, and it flew a few hundred feet, they went back to the drawing board to refine the knowledge received. Intelligent Design cannot exist without experience. So long as it remains Intelligent Design, pure but untested, it remains analogous to any number of very talented young novelists who never publish because they never get their book to the point where they want it to be seen. They will not put their book out on the waters. Whereas God, I will obviously argue, launches each Intelligent Design to see what happens to it. That is how God learns, how God proceeds to the next Intelligent Design.

Let me enjoy one wild aspect of this notion. In my book about Henry Miller, I spoke of three men coming into a hostess's living room, Henry James, Hemingway, and Henry Miller. Each takes off his hat and behold! There's a cow turd on each head. James, I then go on to say, might have

perished from an experience that awful. Hemingway would have gone into a depression—he would have seen it as emblematic of the nature of life. Just when life seemed something you could enjoy, unexpected disasters shattered your mood. And Miller would have said, "Good Lord, how did that shit get on my head? And look at the hostess. Are her nostrils quivering, or is it her twat? She is so excited and perturbed—what a wonderful moment!" Miller is an example of someone who couldn't stay with a plot for five minutes because he wanted to run right into the world and discover something new about himself and/or the world. He is at one extreme, Henry James at the other. Between them lies the effective use of Intelligent Design.

ML: But what would Joyce have done?

NM: Joyce is so much of a genius I won't try to trim his coattails. I don't know what he would have done with the cow turd.

ML: I think he would have appreciated it.

NM: He might have looked for a conflation of the twenty-two words in fifteen languages that exercised the concept of shit. What would be the wonderful sound he would come up with? On the other hand, he would have been removed from the situation. It was not life he was interested in so much as language.

ML: I disagree. The first person to wipe his ass in a novel is Leopold Bloom.

NM: Your point..

ML: You recently criticized Sartre's existentialism for being "floorless." Without floor.

NM: Without a foundation.

ML: Because, as you put it, "It is, after all, near to impossible for a philosopher to explore into why we are here without entertaining some notion of what the prior force might have been." Therefore, if we grant your limited God as that prior force, then I'm compelled to ask what force preceded your God? I assume you would choose infinite regress rather than a Prime Mover?

NM: Again, I refuse to be trapped by such questions. They are the atheist's last line of defense. There's a story you're probably familiar with, of Bertrand Russell and an old lady—Russell is talking about the origin of the universe and how it is not knowable. An old lady in the audience speaks up. She says, "On the contrary, Professor Russell. I know the basis of the universe." He says, "What is it, Madam?" She replies, "The universe is resting upon a turtle." "Madam, that's very helpful, but what is the turtle resting upon?" And she says, "It's turtles all the way down!"

ML: I do remember that.

NM: I'm not going to get trapped in arguments that ask me to explain what came behind the God I'm talking about.

ML: But you beat Sartre over the head because he won't allow for a force behind humanity. Why can't we then try to find out—I'm not trying to refute you, but—

NM: Let me put it this way: we first have to become close enough to God and helpful enough to God—large questions we haven't even entered—the relationship of humankind to God is something we haven't even touched upon—but until we can feel we are some kind of great help for God, why should God trust us? You remember, at the end of Harlot's Ghost, Hugh Montague goes off on this—to me—intriguing speech that God, having decided that the advent of humans was not to be trusted, then created the illusion of evolution. In reality, the earth was created entire, ex nihilo, by God in six days, but He then laid in evidence all over the earth and in the seas that evolution had done it instead over millions of years. That way, people could not get near to God's roots. Implied in all that is a suggestion that when we get close enough to God to feel we are in some kind of alliance, why, then we might begin to have some knowledge of who is behind God. But that won't happen until we get nearer to God.

ML: But you do see that as a possibility.

NM: Ultimately. If things go far better than I expect they will.

ML: I don't know if you're familiar with the philosopher David Hume—

NM: Yes, in college. I had him. Vaguely, you might say.

ML: Well, Hume got into the Intelligent Design argument. One of the proofs of St. Thomas Aquinas for the existence of God is the argument from design. It goes back that far, a thousand years. Aquinas has many proofs of God's existence but the fifth one was that design is so perfect in the universe—he didn't even see beyond the solar system—

NM: Right there, you run smack into the most obdurate aspect of Catholicism, the insistence of Catholicism on God's perfection. What characterizes my idea of Intelligent Design is that it is partial. We do well to grasp the notion that these are partial attempts. I'm glad I have the novel to fall back upon as a metaphor for this. When I write a novel, it's an attempt to come up with a piece of intelligent design, but it's never perfect. Some parts are better than others. If it goes into publication, the critical returns come back. Very often those returns have little relation to what you had written. Occasionally, they do. Slowly, over the years, you learn more. By the end of your life, you may be wiser as a novelist than when you started. The heart of one of my notions then is that God, too, is always

looking to become wiser. What you create, may, in the beginning, not be understood all too well.

ML: Listen to this collision between Aquinas and David Hume: Hume criticized the argument from design. In particular, he emphasized there is no legitimate way to infer the properties of God from the qualities of the world, His creation. For instance, Hume questioned, how can we be sure the world was not created by a team? Or this may be but only one of many attempts at creation, the first few having been botched? Or, on the other hand, our world could be the puerile first attempt of an infant deity who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance.

NM: That last doesn't fulfill my notion of the passion implicit in the artistry of God. I can't conceive of a great artist ever junking a work and moving on because it's lame—not if that has been his major opus. I certainly do lean to the notion that our world is God's major opus. But Hume did put it well on the argument for a perfect universe. From my point of view he was correct in seeing that as near to intolerable. The notion of a perfect universe scrambles people's brains.

ML: All the same, the Catholic Church is a fabulously successful institution—and probably because of that insistence on a perfect universe.

NM: Fabulously successful, yes, but you could also say the Jewish religion has been fabulously successful in one way—the Jews didn't perish. But, what a price they paid! And I'd add, what a price Catholics have paid. To have created a Church that brought so much architectural beauty to the world, so much musical beauty, so much ritual beauty—and then be locked into a set of notions they can't let go of, notions that explain nothing, but elevate contradictions and magnify spiritual and moral confusion.

You know, when they are beautiful, the services of organized religion move me. I feel "How tragic. How painful." All this devotion, all this loyalty, and it goes into an intellectual sump. It explains nothing. All you are finally asked to believe is that God will be there to hear your prayers, God will welcome us when we die—as if that's all God has to do.

ML: What about Hume's idea the universe might have been created by a team?

NM: Not impossible. Not impossible. It explains one of my basic notions. The team soon fell out of sorts with one another and we ended up with God and the Devil.

ML: A joint endeavor—

NM: Like those South Seas Companies in the 1700s, the 1800s.

JMcN: If, as you say, the Creator is an artist, and not all creative works are equally successful, wouldn't this lead quite easily to racism? That is, couldn't the "inferior race," however it's defined, whether the non-Aryans scapegoated by the Nazis, or the "ice people" of the Afro-centric extremists, simply be one of God's less successful creations?

NM: Well, I reject the language of the question. One of the absolute disasters that Hitler brought to human understanding was an abuse of the concept of race. Because race offers us great clues. It is perfectly possible—and here again, one can only speculate—but it is perfectly possible that races, in the beginning, were Intelligent Design for different situations. In other words, for people in the tropics, God was saying, "well, how can I design the heating system of their bodies so they can bear the excessive warmth more easily?" And made separate adjustments for the north. We're discovering that living in separate climates produces different relaxations and strictures of the throat. Languages reflect that. Mind you, God as the artist, might be discovering within the material itself, where the continuation might be. Certain sculptors talk about how they do not know exactly what the work will become until they cut into the marble. The marble reveals what they must do with the next stroke. The same thing may

be true with human designs, or animal design. The environment plays its great role.

JMcN: Your conception of God as artist assumes that God is both vastly—but not all—good and vastly—but not all—powerful. But why couldn't God be not very compassionate at all and instead immensely curious? He could be fascinated by, but not especially compassionate toward creation, much like a child who winds up toys and watches them slam into each other and chortles at the smashup. You say, "In other words, why are there volcanoes? Because God was not a perfect engineer." Or because like a two-year-old, God found the noise and fury fascinating and amusing. Maybe even the shrieks of the dying fascinating and amusing. To use the ultimately reductive phrase, you keep assuming God is a nice person. That seems a bit arbitrary.

NM: It is arbitrary, and it could be my conditioning. I grew up in a household that was as religious as the next—it wasn't a dogma-driven household, but I remember my mother on Friday night praying before a lit candelabra, praying to the Shekhina, who is, of course, the wife of God, and there were tears in my mother's eyes and a feeling of great tenderness came from her. I think I always took it for granted that God is compassionate in relation to us.

Now, the arguments raised above cannot be refuted. I cannot say, "No, God is not going in for capers." Of course, God could go in for mean acts. But to me, the notion that God and the Devil are in conflict with one another makes more sense. So, I believe, we've got this one God who is more good than not..

ML: Well, your mother's father was a rabbi.

NM: Yes. He studied to be a rabbi in Lithuania but by the time he came over here, the only way he could make his living was as a peddler. Then he moved to a small town called Long Branch, New Jersey, where he opened a butcher shop. There he worked as a butcher. There was only one synagogue in Long Branch, so when the rabbi was ill or off on vacation, my grandfather stood in for him. And my mother was very proud of this. The fundamental snobbery of the Jews—it was much better to be a rabbi than a butcher. I was delighted, it gave two different strains to develop in myself.

ML: Well, I'm thinking of your mother's devotion and the tear in her eye—obviously, she must have come from a pretty religious household.

NM: My grandfather was most religious—he began studying the Talmud when he was four years old. The best thing to be said about the Talmud is it's very hard to become a fundamentalist while studying it. It's all too easy when living with the Bible but difficult when reading the Talmud. Unlike

the Old Testament, it inquires into the nuances of things. For instance, in that long-gone age, people brought animals to the temple to be sacrificed. Very often there were small disasters—a poor man might have decided to sacrifice his prize heifer because his child was ill. But on his way into the synagogue with his heifer, the animal would defecate. Well, the Talmud is ready to focus on where it defecated. Was it outside on the patio? Or did it defecate on the steps? In the vestibule? In the aisle? At the altar approach? Was it on the altar? For all these are separate instances from the most holy, and so call for different penalties. In certain cases the animal can still be sacrificed. At other sites, the animal is lost completely—if it defecates too close to the altar, it must be disposed of completely. It cannot be eaten. In the Talmud, there are all these efforts to find zones of relative compatibility between God and humans—so it becomes the exact opposite of the Old Testament, and the New Testament where the law is inflexible. "This is the way it is. Don't argue with it."

ML: Well—there is a certain measure of Orphic ambiguity in the utterances of Christ.

NM: I wouldn't call it ambiguity. I see it as the wars of committees who are looking to fix what His behavior might have been. For their theological purposes, not his.

ML: Did your mother talk much about her father?

NM: She adored him, and he was a very kind man. One story I loved when I was a kid. She once said, "My mother worked so hard in the butcher shop, and we as children worked hard, too. So, we'd get angry at my father because whenever a poor woman would come in and he'd weigh the meat she bought, he'd put his finger under the scale so it cost her less. And we thought, "That's all very well, but money is being taken away from us."

ML: So he was a compassionate man.

NM: I was only four when he died. But I like to think so.

JMcN: Here's a question on ritual: All your ideas 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 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 and 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 that people at religious meetings cite such events as miracles. Prayers are not usually answered. I always felt the Lord has enough to take care of without having to listen to all that. Think of God 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 better," all that, all that.

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 that often.

Now let's suppose some people have a child who's ill, and they pray to God with great sincerity for their child to live. I'm willing to accept the idea that that's not something to sneer at. I'm not saying it helps or it works but humanly speaking, we can certainly feel for the parent.

JMcN: When you were talking about Gandhi, you said: "But 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 the Jews have 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 the God behind the God, it's perfectly conceivable to me that the God 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 never saw, that your work is illumined for you. Well, that 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 most of the time it is greedy, and looking for an undeserved advantage. I'm a mediocrity, I'm kind of stupid, God, but maybe you'll help me because I'm praying to You.

JMcN: This is about Buddhism: what's your take on the Buddhist notion of the bodhisatva 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 "boddhisatva"—a helper, a teacher, a way-shower—and keep reincarnating until everyone has achieved nirvana. Devout Buddhist lay people of many persuasions, and all the monks and nuns, take the "boddhisatva vow" at an advanced stage of their training.

NM: I think it's a beautiful notion. The difficulty I've always had with Buddhism is nirvana. As I see it, the point of existence is not to rise above all petty feeling, but on the contrary, to be able to struggle with our 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 didn't appeal. I remember talking to a friend of mine who's a good Buddhist and I got into a polite rage over drinks: "You Buddhists always talk about nothingness, at how to arrive at nothingness. I'm a writer, and 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 that nothingness in order to get a few ideas. I said, you're not really talking about nothingness. Nothingness is an awful state! It's an empty state. Why don't you talk about what it really is, which is the ineffable? When you get into the ineffable, then you have something to talk about!"

I like to think he was struck with the thought, even a little.

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

Whether true or not, is another matter. How can any human choose to reincarnate rather than going into Nirvana? In that sense, I'm beyond my range. But it is a beautiful notion.

JMcN: At the end of your last interview, you said that in many ways the Creator was like 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 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 wonderful happens. 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, there is something in the universe that rewards you for goodness. Prayer is the ugly stepchild of that emotion.

To shift the course of this discussion, there are some remarks I want to add. I have been thinking about this for a long time. Part of the interest I've had in theology, not my fundamental interest, but still vital, has always been political. In other words, what kind of political system would God like? And I'm not sure God is certain. In different times, God may have been partial to Monarchy, to Communism, and certainly was interested in Democracy, in Capitalism. These systems are not without comparison to the designs of His animals. Which ones work 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, we could end badly. It's why I speak of an existential God.

You may ask: Where is the positive element in all this? What might give us a sense of beauty, religious awe, or even a feeling that I might want to be near to God? What do people like me believe? What are our positive intimations of God? Well, I do believe there are elements of compassion in

our world, elements of goodness. I might even believe that love may be 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 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 argues, a huge drag upon existence. They are 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 interesting and powerful conservative who ever wrote. Yet, as an argument, it only goes so far before it falls short, even crashes. And for a very simple reason. It is that the aristocracy was corrupt, the oligarchs of capitalism are corrupt. Conservatism is as filthy in its practices as its 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, Socialism has never worked. Why? Because it refuses to live with the notion that God exists and is part of the human balance. So a built-in difficulty intrudes on what was conceived as an equitable system. It is that the people who come to power under socialism who do not believe in the existence of God, are soon engaged in a

hegemony of the ego. My feeling, then, is that to advocate socialism with no existential sense of religion as a foundation, 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 noble in civilization. I would argue that unless we have a profound understanding of the needs of the poor, and the rights of the poor, and the passion of the poor to become more than they are at present, we are looking to bypass the horrors of society. So I say that socialism without belief in an existential God cannot work well, whereas socialism with a belief in a God who wants much of what we want can open life and society for us. If that is workable, if a socialist society should ever exist with a belief in an existential God, I think we might begin to find some of the real beginnings of human equity. Let me say, since I have a great distrust of large organizations and obsessive government power, that I also think small business must be a viable part of any state 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 well-being of all, the ongoing enrichment of the culture of all. To keep such socialism alive, small business has to be encouraged, and the notion of community, of neighborhood. Behind it all would be 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 shares desires with us, that we are at last working together, yes, finally, after centuries and millenia of hatred of god, beseechments of God, intense if mindless prayer, valleys and promontories of ritual, attempts to take God by 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 God, and God is working with us, and we don't understand

God altogether and God doesn't understand us altogether, but we even might have a certain regard for each other. If you have a society built on the religious notion that God needs us as much as we need God, that does offer a little more promise than the ongoing notion of corporate capitalism that greed is good.

Metaphysical interview VII

ML: Today, we're going to discuss theodicy and its several attempts to reconcile the coexistence of evil and God. Any venture that looks to deal with the philosophical problem of evil, is theodicy. And there are many.

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 goodness all the more.

It is analogous to the way that the blind man healed by Jesus appreciated his 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 by so

many branches of religion? We laugh at people who insist on being constantly glorified. We speak of neurotic movie stars or spoiled athletes. And crazy generals. Or impossible authors. One of the few things we all seem pretty certain of is that excessive vanity, once it becomes a thing in itself, is dire. By that logic, a god-sized vanity must be worse. 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 it that God's need to be loved is crucial because God, like us, is over-extended? When, after all, do we have our greatest need to be adored? It is precisely when we are worn thin, when our

courage, our stamina, our determination, our belief that we possess worth, is attenuated. At such times, we may be more in need of love.

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

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

ML: Moving to my second point, you find no 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 receive it and return it? What they're saying—without understanding, because they never follow anything to a logical 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 thinking through to 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. Generally, people who need love desperately are not 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 Devil, that God lives in terror, expecting to be destroyed by mankind so soon as humans obtain enough power. That may be a real possibility.

We glimpse the edge of such danger in medical technology for example.

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, 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 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? To say it once again, I work on the notion that God is not all-powerful, and that opens all sorts of questions. The first 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 understand it? If children are moving toward evil, are parents always the first to know? Not often.

ML: It was Dostoyevsky who said suffering is the sole origin of consciousness. That only through suffering could we improve our minds, and so be able to understand 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 destroyed. Suffering can be a Bed of Procrustes and maim more spirit than it creates. Some learn best by suffering through small stages, shifts in one's uglier habits. If, for example, if 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 those who pass through such storms of the soul can come out on the other side not emotionally crippled, and have much to offer. But some are hobbled, and 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 hard-sell salesmanship. "You won't know what true happiness is until you buy this car. Don't let people tell you it's a lemon; it's a wonderful car. You'll come back and thank me for having sold you this car."

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, the prime theological misdirection rears up right here. Anyone who looks even casually at the variety of incredible animals that 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 in the American Kennel Club.)

My underlying notion is not that God knows completely what He or She is doing, but rather that God is searching to do the best He or She can do to improve things. And, the moment you accept a darker notion of existence, and assume there are hazards and perils added by the Devil, God's effort is exerted in the face of large odds. It has become a contest where no one, human or divine, necessarily knows which side may win. In contrast, look at how our minds, our sense of challenge, is reduced if it is all being done for God's greater glory and all we have to do is guard our patience and pass through our suffering. Because at the end, there will be a happy ending—

no! No! I much prefer the Greek's assumption 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 can we appropriate the confidence to proclaim that a wonderful heaven is waiting for all of us, and we need only to 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. All eastern religions—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 until the 20th century came along. I think the Holocaust shattered it. Shattered it force majeure. A useful notion, force majeure. It says that these particular facts are so strong that they dictate the first way, and maybe the only way, you can approach the problem.

Contemplate the Holocaust, the gulags, and the atom bomb. The mystery of suffering is intensified by at least one order of magnitude. In consequence, the notion that evil is illusion becomes 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 almost as offensive. It suggests that we are at best no more than the equal of any holy cow in any Hindu pasture. Indeed, the notion that all life is illusion is not a bad way for the upper

classes of India to salve their bad conscience at the sight of the hideous poverty around them. But that's another discussion.

If you believe in karma as I do, and so 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 bureaucratic problems with reincarnation. If populations die at a steady rate with only a statistical spike here and there—a local earthquake, a terrible storm or flood—God can receive and judge incoming souls. Forgive this unforgivably crude 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—they can possess no sense of why they now must die—then they have less preparation within themselves as they enter reincarnation. The finest part of their spirit has been lopped off.

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 then, and, it may be profound.

So I think the Holocaust ravaged many divine entrances into death. I think there was confusion in the heavens, even a celestial nightmare for God and the angels. Reincarnation was flooded.

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, prepared to die. What was most 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, please 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 at a given moment of betrayal is different—dying in a rage, feeling that God or someone or something on high betrayed them.

In contrast, the soldiers in Stalingrad knew there was a good chance they were going to perish. That, I would submit, offered less grievous problems to the powers of reincarnation than the obliteration 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 is never overcome by even passing despair at huge, unforeseen disasters—indeed, why must we assume that God anticipates every disaster? Or is in command of every energy for every occasion? He or She created our world but that doesn't mean every oncoming contingency was delineated in advance.

ML: So, what happened to those victims of the gas chambers?

NM: I would offer this large assumption. I would say most of them who desired reincarnation did receive it, but in unsatisfactory fashion. This flows 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, knowledge that you will have a better life or a poorer one at the start of your next life. But when

God is not functioning at His or Her best because God is too beleaguered, too extenuated, too despairing, too exhausted, then the choices made for reincarnation can become gross—there's not enough of God to go around.

The Holocaust deadened God's wit. Too much was happening at once.

And God, too, has limits, is not inexhaustible. This is at the core of everything I have been saying: God is a divinity possessed of great energies, great creativity, great possibility, but that does not mean that God is all-powerful.

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

where the students are energized and ready to learn, whereas others, when you walk in, are 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 much harder to reach. How does this not apply to reincarnation? I am now speculating outrageously, but allow me. Let us say, 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 here or there. In normal situations, they can make quick decisions. But if the soul is in disarray, if it is analogous to deciding how to give necessary counsel to a person who has come into your room in fearful drugged-up condition, you don't necessarily know where or how they should be assigned to class. And I think this carries over to some extent to what I'm talking about.

ML: OK. Next one. The big picture. We've talked about this before, but 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: Of course.

ML: So things we think are a terrible tragedy turn out —you know, you say a year later—I've heard you do this many times.

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 that 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 Book 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 reality. I wrote a book which concluded that two things happened because of the crucifixion. One: that God lost to the Devil when He had expected to win—He thought Jesus was going to change humankind profoundly and more immediately. He did not foresee the end. And God, having so much to create and oversee all at once is not necessarily focused on what each one of His Creations are capable of. So I'm willing to assume that Jesus was His bold stroke. In chess, for instance, when a really bold move is made and

you are not sure how it is going to turn out, you record it with an exclamation point plus a question mark. I would 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 right. 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 had died for our sins. What a deep chord was struck! But to say this was planned in advance—crucifixion and resurrection—dubious. God may well have been responding to a crushing defeat with half a victory. That makes more sense to me: God was re-writing the depths of what had happened after the events had taken place—which is exactly what we humans do all the time. We call it History. It is one of our fundamental activities. It enables us to keep on living. 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 vanity to protect.

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 fundamental 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 young deity, this will be your territory. Do what You can with it."

ML: That's a Gnostic idea.

NM: "And if You fail—well, other young deities have failed before you.

All the same, You are an artist, the greatest artist we have available just now

for Your assigned part of the cosmos." Given this scenario, God soon

discovers that He or She has a great deal to learn about evil. And God is

now fascinated with evil. You could go so far as to say God plays with evil,

uses it sometimes, but is not fundamentally evil. Is not fundamentally

sympathetic to evil.

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

NM: Yes, I see evil as looking to destroy the part of the universe that we

know.

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 sniffed the miasma. 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 abuse it.

They wiggle 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 on its precepts.

Yes, God had to give us free will in order to find out about us. He could learn so much more about us once 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 a tri-partite war. If it is only a contest between God and the Devil, and we are no more than 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. To be free we need the ability to present ourselves as the third creative force in this combat. That opens a new kind of fear for us. Some might be terrified that we would all go down in disaster. Others supposed that God would finally be victorious, and, yes, we, His soldiers, would all go to heaven. That was a view held for centuries. Now, it is as if any one of these three forces might triumph. We can even conceive of a universe that manages to survive for a period without God and the Devil—to a degree. 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's world, our humans' world.

But that could prove disastrous, absolutely disastrous.

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.

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 was once built on the basis that nearly everything contributed to the feeding cycle. Add reincarnation, and the cycles of life and death were taken care of. This was the original and doubtless beautiful 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's a deep belief. So deep 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. That was one jump by mankind which 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 speculation.

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. 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 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.

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: Probably. 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 could 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: For one thing, by trying to get that prodigious temper under control.

By daring to have a Son, a great attempt to improve matters. It may be God was 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: Absolutely.

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: Of course.

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 passage 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 demands are placed upon 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 create a 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 subtle availability. Perhaps the greatest gods of the cosmos are also on a search and may not be wholly undisposed to welcome Us.

ML: I'd like to say a few words about Gnosticism. It is not a religious movement that people necessarily know much about, and it has been shunted pretty much off the face of the ideological earth.

Here are some of the general traits: First, a disdain for authority and Orthodoxy: A celebration of difference and diversity, although Gnostics did not, of course, use the word diversity. A great belief, however, in self knowledge, of studying the self, seeing the self as a phenomenon that you had to understand in order to attain larger knowledge. The self as a pathway to larger knowledge. They were dualists, but not absolute about it. They got that from the Greeks. They saw the body and the spirit as separate but mutually dependent.

NM: Did they have a sense of Apollo and Dionysus? I'm thinking of how

Nietzsche was obsessed by them in his early career.

ML: Yes, that would not be foreign to them at all but there was more of an opposition between the Judaic and the Hellenic. They were very taken with Jewish mysticism which of course had been around long before Christ. As a sect, the Gnostics seem to have come into existence around the second century B.C. and they were an esoteric branch of Judaism when they began. They were not separate, however. As you know from reading in The Golden Bough the sects interpenetrated each other. There were many competing at this time. But the Gnostics had great respect for Judaism on one hand and at the same time valued the Greek belief in knowledge and self examination. They prized that very highly.

NM: My knowledge of Jewish mysticism is not profound, but I did some reading in the Kabbalah and the Zohar. But neither existed 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 various uprooting of the heresies in the early centuries of

Christianity took care of the Gnostics. Not so?

ML: It diminished them greatly. Gnosticism came into existence around the

second century B.C. and built its 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 attack. Because

St. John was a great believer in revelation, and the Gnostics did not believe in it.

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 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 that live on the border of Iraq and Iran-- the Mandeans, who are still there. The key attribute to remember is that in Greek *Gnosis* means "knowledge." *Gnosticos* is someone who is seeking knowledge by searching the depths of the self, looking at the self as the available ground for enlightenment and knowledge. 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. They didn't believe in procreation. While

Christianity became monolithic, Gnosticism divided. And that is another one of

the reasons it didn't survive. Nor did it have Augustine and Irenaeus and the

Church fathers and St. Paul drawing everything together, and organizing the 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 that Christianity had to be absolute—

otherwise, it was not going to work. To hold it together there must not be

questions. Only answers. So the Gnostics were directly offensive to the Church

fathers. What they were saying is what some of us are saying today: That there are

no answers. There are only questions. The mark of a good society, we argue, 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 built on the conclusion that 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; even

as it is off the board today for fundamentalists.

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 half-work and half don't. Certainly, for

centuries, they functioned well enough to limp along full of unanswerable questions and hideous inequalities ready to sweep all unanswerable questions under the rug of absolute faith.

But, let me return from my bias to my ignorance. Tell me more about the Gnostic sense of Cosmology.

ML: I would say they posited a supreme God who was behind everything unknown. And this supreme God gave birth to a lesser divine being, and then a whole series of lesser divine beings. One was called Sophia which in Greek means wisdom. Sophia created another creature usually referred to as the Demiurge. Sophia created this creature out of a desire to learn more about where Sophia had come from. It is, however, endlessly more complex. The Demiurge thinks that it is the God of the Old Testament. It is very similar. It is a jealous God, an angry God.

The Demiurge then creates the flora and the fauna, and then people, and does it

imperfectly. Even though humans are three times removed from the highest God

out there, they still feel this divine spark within them amidst a general feeling of

loneliness, incompleteness and abandonment. In this scheme of things, Jesus

becomes a messenger from Sophia or the God behind Sophia. Jesus is there to

keep alive the spark of what is good in human beings while opposing what is evil.

NM: Would this be a recognition by Sophia that the Demiurge may have been a bit
of a mistake?

ML: Yes.

NM: Most of the Gnostics believe that?

ML: Yes. In some versions, the Demiurge tries to undercut the messenger, Jesus or

Mohammed or Zoroaster—these new figures that come in with wisdom—the

Demiurge tries to attack them. Sometimes this gives rise to Manicheanism which

says that good and evil are at war, evil dominates the world, but good is going to win out.

NM: That does bring up a question. Where in this schemata is Satan?

ML: Satan could be the Demiurge.

NM: Yes, but this creates confusion. For some Jehovah is Jehovah. For others, Jehovah becomes Satan.

ML: Let us say that Sophia creates many figures, some very strong like the Demiurge and some are lesser evil figures. A whole range of figures emanate from the higher source. Any one of these can be used to exercise Evil.

NM: Well, let's add that long before the Gnostics, it was taken for granted that there were many gods. This is true of the Egyptians and of the Greeks. Certainly the Hindus believed in a variety of deities. And the Africans certainly believed in all kinds of high spirits. It is as if Judaism and then Christianity came to a

profound determination that it did not serve to look for cosmic truth. Human

beings had to be shepherded into believing that there was one truth.

ML: And one God.

NM: And one God. This had to be established, confirmed and ground into the psyche. 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 as a body whom Augustine and Irenaeus

had attacked. 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 so jealous a God as 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, Orsiris—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? So many of these minor gods did explain aspects of life that are ignored by early Christianity. And it was precisely this curiosity about the nature of God that Judaism and Christianity saw as the great enemy. Because you cannot build a solid society so long as there are too many ways to elaborate the details. In this sense, you can look upon the Judeo-Christian enterprise as determined to become an absolute arbiter over the more mysterious details of existence.

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

NM: Yes, do not look into yourself. Refer to the 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.

NM: Yes.

ML: That was always implicit, but finally they had to state it. It was a final

consolidation of Papal power. In a lot of the reading I've done about Gnosticism, 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 with the details worked out and authorized? On the other hand, Judaism was relatively small. So, 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, then Gnosticism might have continued.

Gnosticism had to be congenial to many, many upper class Romans. That would

be my guess.

ML: Yes.

NM: After all, it gave them a chance to explore themselves. When people are wealthy, they want to do just that, explore themselves. But there were other leaders in Rome, and they believed that Rome was the answer to existence; Rome, not religion, but Rome. Government was the answer to existence. So, some of them also saw that with Christianity they could fortify the notion of central government, of 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 the aria. 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 at the center.

The large point, I think, is we don't know if it was necessary to have such authority at the top, not if human society was to develop. 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. Of course, irritation in the oyster shell does create the pearl. The lie implicit in this new theologically ordained faith, this respect for order from the invisible above, did present obstacles to the finest minds of those centuries. They were obliged to believe in dogma. Their lives, after all, were at stake—which can

account for the philosophical distances they travelled 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 special means of language that will enable you to come out at the end with an affirmation of the mighty oxymoron—God is All-Good and All-Powerful. Those words violate our experience. 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 in 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, not because of what spiritual propagandists have been trying to put in my head all these years, but simply because it makes sense to me. If there is not a God, then I cannot conceive of how the universe around me 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, no more than any of

us. God is a creator, God is an artist, but God is still doing no more than His or Her best. Or Their godly best—if it happens to be a marriage. 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. Whether our God has to satisfy those higher Gods—quite possibly. That is not knowable. What we can discern is that we live, most likely, in an existential universe where the end is not known. And, so the reason we are having these dialogues—and I cringe at the ongoing crudity of my presentation of my ideas, but nonetheless it is what I can offer—I feel, yes, the reason we are having these dialogues is that I think fundamentalist notions of absolute authority have come to a point where they are too expensive to live under—too excruciating 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. They wreck our ability to think.

ML: You have not spoken today of your intimation that there is not only a God but a force opposing that God.

NM: Well, I do believe that Satanic forces are as powerful as God-like forces.

Both are at war within us. We humans are the battlefield for that war. How it will turn out is not known. In that sense, if there is such a thing as victory in these matters, God can win or Satan can win. But that brings us once more into such rank speculation that I leave these matters for the novelist in me. I will say that if 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 very improbable

propositions made them go through wonderful 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 to pay for their failures through centuries afterward)

nonetheless, the powers of human ratiocination have been increased. That's part of

the perversity of philosophy.

ML: So I guess from what you've said you now understand why here and there in

commentary on your work and writing people will say, "Oh, Mailer, he's sort of a

Gnostic."

NM: Well, yes I do understand now. Not that it matters. What I do want to

emphasize before we finish is that I want to accomplish something with these

dialogues which intellectuals normally don't look to engage in. You are not

supposed to talk about religion unless you know a great deal about it, formally

speaking, and then you are wise to say little. And I have proceeded to ponder these

questions without being qualified. Yet, my basic argument is that of course I am

qualified. 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: this notion that God is existential, that God

is doing the best that He or She can do, is so fundamental, that I 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 is the most toxic of them all—which is equal to saying

that modern-day fundamentalism is poison for 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

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need order. We need command from above." That was a stage in human existence.

It's much like the stages of existence children pass through where they must live

under order at a certain point or it all comes apart.

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 quicksand of economics.

NOTE: This interview has not been edited.

Interview conducted June 14, 2006 Provincetown, MA

J. M. Lennon: One of the most difficult things about your theology for me is that you believe that humans don't always know what the right action is, but your God, as you have said, need and seeks the efforts of humans and vice-versa. He is the general, we are the army—the army of light, I guess we could call it. Wouldn't prayer be an avenue for the general to communicate with his troops? I mean, prayer might be a way to get a sense of what God wants done in the cosmic war.

Norman Mailer: Well, I think you're conflating a whole series of separate notions. To me there are three, four or five questions that have to be

answered bit by bit because to try to reply directly to your question we'd be all over the place. Let's go through it phrase by phrase, because there is an awful lot there in that question. So read it again and I'll stop you when I...

JML: One of the most difficult things about your theology for me is that you believe that humans don't always know what the right action is.

NM: Alright. Right there. Of course we don't know. Read a little further if you would.

JML: Alright. But God, your God, needs and seeks the efforts of humans and vice-versa.

NM: There, that's the full question. There is a marvelous remark by Trotsky who said: "You can tell the truth by comparison of the lies." Now of course, some of those Lennons and those Trotskys were almost God-like in their confidence, right or wrong. Of course they were very wrong on so many things. But the fact is, if we're going to get an interesting notion of God, we can't have (sounds like 'a simpleton'...)...in other words, they can learn from people's errors and from people's misapprehensions and people's absolute false notion of certainty, almost as much as they can learn from someone who is absolutely truthful which is a rare condition for human beings given the fact that we're all so profoundly divided. In other words, when we speak of being truthful, which is the parenthesis for all of this, what we're talking about is one half of us is really expressing itself. Very very rarely do the two sides come together as I've said many a time. When they do, one has huge energy. (can't make out....)when your worst

motivator and your best motivator are equally engaged then you're full of energy, but that's a rare occurrence. But let's go on. I think there's more in there.

JML: Well, I guess the central part of the question for me is the general needs to communicate with the troops and the troops with the genera...

NM: No, no, no... Now listen....

ML: Otherwise the metaphor doesn't work with the genera.

NM: I've used it. I've used that metaphor mainly to say that a good general doesn't keep his troops waiting out in the rain. I've used that much more as a novelist than for God and his people. To speak of God as a general

is...Let me limit it again. I believe that God is engaged in the cosmos with carrying a vision that he has across the cosmos and there is huge resistance out there in the cosmos and within, given my notion that the Devil exists. I certainly didn't spend five years on a book, The Castle in the Forest, without believing that there is an equal force to God in the Devil. So in that sense, it isn't that the general has to communicate with his troops. Give me the phrase again, I really want to be responsive to it.

JML: God is the general. We are a part of his army, the army of like.

Wouldn't prayer be an avenue for the general to communicate with his troops.

NM: Is that the next question?

JML: No, it's the same one.

NM: Forgive me, but I really feel you're vulgarizing the whole concept. If

God is the general and we are his troops—that is a very rough metaphor, it's

mine—but you can't start perusing it literally, getting into chains of

command and this and that. It's presumptuous. All I can have about the

nature of God is not (*sounds like 'confidence'.*) I can have intimations. I

have one fundamental intimation; God is not All-Powerful.

JML: You have always said that humans are the third force.

ML: Yes, yes.

JML: And that God wants us to step up to the plate and work for his vision.

So, I would assume at some point....

NM: You're assuming too much.

JML: No communication at all is what you're saying.

NM: No, no, no, no. I'm saying we have instincts. We have our instincts.

Sometimes they're accurate, sometimes they are inaccurate. We work on the basis of our instincts. Don't forget, very often what we're doing, very often, to be crude about it, we're working for the Devil. Sometimes we're working for God. Most of the time, neither. The two neutralize each other to a great extent. There are times when we are working for human-kind alone, when

we want no part of God or the Devil. It's these complexities that we're living with. I don't want it to get too schematic to begin with.

JML: Ok. Alright, let me give you another one.

NM: Have I answered you?

JML: Yes, I think you have answered me. In an earlier interview you said you doubted the efficacy of prayer because you said that most prayer were requests for personal gains or status; money, a job, a new car or what have you. I agree there is a huge funnel of such requests going up at all times, but other people pray for guidance, for forgiveness, for strength to avoid sin. These types of prayers may exceed the grasping, greedy type. Who could say?

NM: I would agree. They do exceed it. And there is a spectrum of prayer, from Noble prayer to Self-seeking prayer to Vulgar prayer. And we can talk about that at a great length today. There is a natural assumption in humans that prayer is noble. In other words, if it isn't asking for something from God ... "God, how can I possibly, me, my meek, humble self, how can I possibly help you because I wish to help you." This is seen as nobler than saying, "I would really like an Impala with loud speakers." Ok, sure. But the point is that I just have a visceral distrust of the efficacy of prayer as a form of communication. For one thing, I'm not sure that God pays attention to prayer, I don't think that God can afford to pay attention to prayer. Think of it as an immensely abused and over-used communication system that is present in human affairs. In other words, God is getting messages all the time from every human being and picks up these messages without the need

of prayer. I think where prayer enters is that occasionally prayers can have such a vibrancy and such a simplicity and such humanity that god is illumined by it and cheered by it. To that extent I will say, who am I to say that prayer never has any meaning? I do think that ninety percent of prayer is wasteful. I think it is self indulgent and, at its worst, it is a species of (*can't make out*) . I heard too many people too many times say in a slightly dead voice, "I'm praying for you." Or, I'm praying for this or I'm praying for that. My own feeling is, and this is crude, but my reaction is, "Go fuck yourself." You don't need it. It's not helping. You're just invading my presence. I see too much of that in prayer and it's just one more petty human weapon. If one human says, "I'm praying for you," there is a suggestion there. It could be well intended, obviously, that they love you, they care about you they worry about you, they're doing the best for you. But my feeling is you don't need to pray if that is the case. If they love you

and really care about you and are feeling that, then you are going to reap that benefit whether they pray for you or not.

JML: How?

NM: How? Through the warmth and feeling you are getting from them.

The honest warmth of feeling rather than the mechanical "I'll pray for you."

JML: You feel that ninety percent of prayer is meretricious?

NM: No, meretricious is too strong a word. Ninety percent of prayer doesn't necessarily lead to anything.

JML: Just static.

NM: Well, to begin with, I think the interception of prayer is one of the Devil's most powerful faculties. Whenever prayer is offered which does not have true purity to it, the Devil has a ball with it. The Devil sees the motives of certain people, sees their needs, sees how to work on their needs. You don't know who you're broadcasting to.

JML: Many religious people find solace in praying together. They believe that group prayer, rather 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 busy for a single cry for intercession, but he can hardly neglect a full house of prayers say, from St. Peters, led by the pope on his son's birthday; quantity changes quality as you are forever telling it.

NM: There is no question in my mind that that would attract God's attention more. You still get into the nature of the prayer. For example, right now we're engaged in a deadly war between Islam and ourselves. Well, if there is anything that characterizes Islam is that they pray together all the time, five times a day indeed. Five times a day they put their nose to the ground and they raise their buttocks towards heaven and they pray and they pray. And we in the west look down on it. We consider it excessive. We don't believe, first off, in Allah, but that's another matter entirely. But if there is Allah, we don't believe that Allah is well intentioned. We believe that Allah is an alien God. So there, the answer to your question is the fact people, whenever they get together, the fact that you have a community of opinion, whenever you have a theater audience and they all laugh as one you could say that that is an extension of prayer. It's human unity, and human unity is very reassuring. To feel that one is part of a great group of people does a lot

for us. But whether prayer is the essence of it is quite another matter. And, as I say, if you're going to say that these prayers to Christ for our soldiers in Iraq and you have a whole community praying that our soldiers don't run into terrorists and then you've got Islamics praying just as powerfully and just as intently that they all get assassinated by roadside bombs—I don't mean to say that every Islamic prayer says that, but a good many of them have that in essence.

JML: Nor does every Christian meeting pray for our soldiers in Iraq. I would say that the people in Italy, at St. Peters, may be praying for us to get out of there.

NM: Alright. Exactly. What I'm getting at is I believe there is a certain telepathic power that humans have. You get a hundred people together, a

thousand people together, or ten thousand, yes the effect is magnified. But to assume it's magnified to good purpose is a very large extension. It can be magnified to a good purpose, to an evil purpose. It can be magnified to a complex and not particularly pertinent purpose. It could be off. Humans are off all the time. America spent close to fifty years believing that Russia was the evil empire while all the time this very ugly, cruel place was getting weaker and weaker and growing worse and worse and less capable of destroying us.

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

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

JML: 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, "maybe the Lord will bring Islam to its knees." Islam is saying, "Allah will take care of us and bring the great Satan to its knees." And so on. The notion that a country is holy I find offensive.

JML: 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. As long as Saudi is over there....

NM: They make the old animosity between the catholics and the protestants seem rather agreeable.

JML: You've spoken about dreams being a contested field. That is that the

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 an awoken mind? A mind seeking a line of communication with

something transcended. I assume you believe that humans can pray to the

Devil as easily as the Lord.

NM: Unwittingly, unwittingly. Let me put it this way, I think that people

who believe in the Devil have ceremonies which are not exactly prayer, they

are invocations. There is a fundamental belief which is curious if you think

about it, in magical groups which are black oriented that you don't get the

Devil by praying to him or her. You invoke him or her. Whereas in Christianity, certainly, the notion that you have a ceremony to invoke God is considered dubious at best. The only place it occurs is in the Mass, I guess. The substantiation of the wafer and the wine. Other than that, you don't invoke god. You pray to God, you don't invoke God.

JML: Well, behind that point, is the notion that if God and the Devil see the territory of dreams at night as a place where their minions get in and send messages and it's so scrambled and fouled up that I always thought that that is why you said the interpretation of dreams is so unreliable. You know, there are so many forces in there.

NM: Exactly.

JML: Scuffling about, well, why doesn't God and the Devil send messages to waking minds?

NM: I think they do all the time. Of course they do. I remember when I met my present wife, we've been together for thirty years, the first day I met her, the first moment I met her, she said "Hello" and I thought she had one of the nicest faces I'd ever seen. She was taller than me, which irritated my machismo a bit and I was about to say, "Boy, are you tall." On top of everything not only being taller than me, she was wearing three inch wedgies, and at that moment I felt a force at the back of my head pulling my head back and saying, "Get out of here, you ass." And I did. I just sort of nodded at her and I walked away. The reason could not have been simpler. As I got to know her over the years I realized that if I'd made that remark when we met we would have gone no further. She is sensitive to that sort of

off-putting remark. That would have been it. So, I really had the feeling that that was not me. Someone was giving me a message. Ok, people have that all the time, right or wrong. Of course God and the Devil communicate. Very often when you're writing well you feel that you are not doing it yourself, exactly, but doing it through a pipeline of unconsciousness and it's all coming through in an agreeable fashion with a skill and style and elegance that you don't possess yourself. So no, of course there is communication. But I think what we would do well to recognize in these matters is that the networks of communication are extremely scrambled. One of the wars that goes on between God and the Devil is play with communication. Go back to Kierkegaard. You never know. The moment you are doing your most saintly you could be doing your most evil. The moment you are doing the most evil you could, in fact, be serving God, and totally mistaken that you are doing evil. In other words, what Kierkegaard

was working for is that we do not know our relation to God and the Devil.

We can hope and we can pray but that doesn't mean that we have it.

JML: You wrote in a letter recently that I read that you thought television was not a medium of communication but a valve. And the valve opens...

NM: No, it opens for some and it closes for others.

JML: Speak to me about that. The valve idea. You talk about the Devil in getting through the valve.

NM: Well, there are certain mediocrities who succeed in television and many fine people who don't. It is significant about television that we don't have any truly superior people on television ever. It's very interesting that

way. For instance, you can't conceive of somebody like Edmund Wilson or Lionel Trilling ever having a show. In England I think it is somewhat better. But in America....

JML: There is Johnny Carson.

NM: And Carson was excellent at what he did but what he did was of the middle. I've felt for a long time that television was essentially the Devil's toy. Not God's mechanism for enriching us. Because of that, there is a valve that just makes some people look more interesting and squeezes others to look silly or shrill. And so forth. But this is just a supposition.

JML: No, it's a very good insight.

NM: Well, that's your opinion. (both laugh.)

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

NM: That is a good point. My feeling is that Karma takes care... Very often when people are praying their (*can't make out word*. 'festeir???') is so fine, is so good is so pure. And if God could only realize what a fine creation he has in them, if God would only pay more attention to them, God would love them more. They pray to get God's love. They feel that they are entitled to it, that they deserve it. My attitude is that Karma takes care of all of that. If you live a life that is a little better one way or another, a little braver, a little more compassionate or responsible or whatever it is that is a positive guide that is not expected to such a degree, you'll be taken care of in your rebirth.

This assumes that a foul up in communication does not occur in reincarnation which I am not at all sure about. I think we're living in a very tight world, including reincarnation. Alright, let's not needle-nose this to death. My argument is that Karma is a substitute for prayer. A real and legitimate and profound substitute for prayer.

JML: The Holy Ghost for Christians is a force of love whose function, to put it boldly, is to act as a psychic bulldozer chopping through all the cosmic static to get the message of God's presence and love to Humans.

NM: If you have a feeling of grace, it is given to you by the Holy Ghost.

JML: If you feel like you've got a line open that's because the Holy Ghost is...

NM: For how long, how long?...

JML: And it's two ways too.

NM: What do you mean, two ways?

JML: One going up and one going down. Your prayer going up, and God's grace coming down. Perhaps I'm putting this crudely, but I wonder if you've ever thought about the Holy Ghost's role in prayer and the answer to prayers.

NM: Well, let me say one thing about prayer, given the many negative things I've said about it. 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 it reverberates in God's domain and attention is paid. But, I think such prayers are as rare as the work of a great artist.

JML: You've just defined the Holy Ghost.

NM: How have I defined it?

JML: That's what the Holy Ghost does is....

NM: No, but I'm saying this isn't (*something..can't get one word. Both are talking at the same time.*) the attention of the Holy Ghost. If the Holy Ghost is God's instrument for receiving the needs of people that the prayer is artful enough, simple enough, in that sense you cut across education. In other

words, you don't have to be an educated person to have a beautiful prayer.

A prayer comes out of the depths of your experience and has a fine balance of perception and passion and forgiveness and true human need. All of those elements form an exceptional unity. A small masterpiece. Yes, alright. If the Holy Ghost is God's instrument then the Holy Ghost would receive that prayer and call it to God's attention. I'm not saying that all prayer is ridiculous, I'm just saying, taken for granted, all you have to do is say to yourself, use P-R-A-Y-E-R (*spells it out*) and all will be fine.

JML: You are arguing 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 buried motive.

JML: And buried motive. And that's rare. That's a rare human endeavor.

NM: Yes, a rare human endeavor.

JML: Well, if you concede that the Holy Ghost is sort of flying around listening and being open to that sort of purity...

NM: Let's not get into that too much.

JML: The saints also have a role in prayer. The definition of a saint is...

NM: For Catholics.

JML: For Protestants too.

NM: forgive my ignorance. You know, I know very little about that sort of matter but it seems to me that the Catholics have about five times as many saints as the Protestants. Is that true or not?

JML: Well, they do have saints. I mean, St. George is a Protestant saint.

There are many saints. Episcopalians and Lutherans will recognize.... All a saint is is someone who is in heaven, who is definitely in heaven.

Obviously, if there is a heaven and there are as many people up there as Christians think there are, there are untold numbers in heaven. However, to know for certain that someone is in heaven, that's the definition of a saint.

NM: Among Catholics? Literally?

JML: 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 church declares saints?

JML: Oh, yes.

NM: Who are the Baptist saints?

JML: I can't speak about that. I think there is a spectrum. The Episcopalans and the Lutherans who are closer to the Catholics. And then you get the Methodists. And then as you move to the Baptists I think the idea of the saint goes away.

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

JML: No, but you do among the Mormons. The Church of Later Day
Saints.

NM: Well, we can't begin to discuss Mormons. It's so different from
everybody else.

JML: It isn't so different. The dictionary of the saint. (*can't make out---
you guys are talking over each other.*) Well, anyway, they are there to
intercede with the Lord. Certain saints intercede on certain matters. For
example, Michael, the Arch Angel, is invoked before battles and has been
for centuries. At the other end of the scale, St. Anthony is there to help find

things. And the prayer is this: "Dear St. Anthony/Please look around/ I've lost my ring/ and it must be found." Now, I can tell you that it works about 70% of the time. At least in my family it does.

NM: Well, and you might find it 70 % of the time on your own.

JML: Absolutely. And you never know. But it is uncanny how many times you say that and....

NM: I won't buy that and I'll tell you why. I have the experience all the time of not having remembered something. And I've learned to tip my hat to my unconscious and say, alright, maybe I'll find it later in the day and I usually do. I don't need St. Anthony. One of the things is that I also believe that the unconscious is also a communication system and sometimes you

have to go searching further and further. In other words, there is an expenditure of energy to find out where you lost something. You have to re-trace the past which very often has dim signals so more attention has to be paid, it's more exhausting. Let me give you an example of what I'm talking about. I like doing crossword puzzles—I say they comb my brain. Very often I'll be doing a tough crossword puzzle and I'll leave a great many blanks. Then three or four hours later, or possibly the next day if I pick it up again I'll find the words I didn't have. Why? Because the unconscious was working on it quietly and came up with it. So that's my St. Anthony.

JML: Let me give you another example. Last year when you spoke at the Provincetown theater and I was in a cast I had the cane that you gave me. And then we came in for the party here and I lost the cane. I couldn't find it and I was very upset. And so I said to my son Joe, help me find the cane. I

must have left it in the theatre. So we went back to the theatre the next day and I looked all over the stage and all over the place. Joe said the prayer, walked into the dressing room and there was a cabinet in the green-room that was in the back and there was a small space about this wide and the cane was there. I asked him, "Why did you go there?" and he said, "I just felt when I walked in the room that I was directed to it."

NM: Well, that's not evidence.

JML. No, it isn't evidence...

NM: I will say to pray to St. Anthony may focus the mind on the real possibilities. Very often when we are looking for something that is lost what we're lacking is focus when we begin the search. And one of the ironies of

prayer is very often it can serve as a fine focus for other matters or adjacent matters or relative matters or direct matters. It's a focus. And I think a lot of people pray in order to intensify there sense of focus. What I don't like about prayer is the enormous baggage that goes with it, the stultification of society that is also common in prayer; the number of mediocre imbasils who all pray for something that they know nothing about with this huge confidence that goes nowhere—you see huge examples of it on television every night—speaking of the efficacy of prayer and they're either a simpleton, a dullard or a malcontent.

JML: I agree. Well, the last line of this is that my point is that prayer is spiritually pliable. Many-faceted, multi-purposed, and at the end of the bell shaped curve, noble and egnoble and maybe the egnoble is asking St. Anthony to find your lost ring or something. I would just challenge you the

next three times you lost something to say, "St. Anthony I've lost something."

NM: No, I can't do it. Let's get into that. If we're really going to accept prayer, one you have to be Catholic, two you have to grow up with the notion of St. Anthony. My point is that praying to St. Anthony may help you to find something, but you have a lot of secondary habits that point you toward a focus, a high focus. In other words, a lot of the high benefits we receive from the saints come from the fact that most people have a dreadful time bringing any kind of focus to their existence. And thinking about saints helps them to focus. Listen, the church didn't last for two thousand years for too little. I, obviously not being a catholic, feel that the distortions in Catholicism are immense. But I'm not going to say that they are ineffective, no. I'd say they are fifty percent effective. It's been very, very good for a

good many people in a good many ways, it's just also that its been stomped upon. Stomped upon with human imagination and I would argue, and this is the greatest sacrilege that I can come up with as far as Catholics are concerned: I would say that Catholicism ultimately has to be seen as stultifying to God. And half possessed by the Devil. And I would say the same for any other religion. I don't slight Catholicism as the villain. All organized religions, in that sense, are obfuscations upon the nature of God.

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

NM: How not. How not? How about the Devil's involvement? There they are, they're battling it out in the streets of the 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 for

god sake; the temptations the agonies, the repressions the wonders. Those wonders that the seminarians have of whether they are working for God or the Devil.

JML: I always remember the story of Jeff Davis when he was in the Seminary for a year and he said at night he would go into his room and he would have a little tiny radio he wasn't supposed to have and he would turn it on and listen to Frank Sinatra. He didn't even climb over the wall or go into the town, but finally he realized that if he was listening to Sinatra every night he was in the wrong game. He'd better get out. And he did.

So, is there anything else?

NM: Do I have anything more to say about prayer?

Theology Interview: N. Mailer, J. M. Lennon. June 19, 2006

JML: You did allude to a couple of times when you felt the need to say a

prayer when someone was very ill.

I told you, the last time I prayed.

JML: For Norris?

Yea.

JML: You told us.

NM: It's in there already? Too bad.

JML: Well, the other time I remember you actually talking about prayer in your own life is when bobby Kennedy was wounded.

NM: Yea, but that was different. That was just, Oh, God, Oh, God, don't let him die. You know, I wouldn't call it a prayer. It was more like a bleat. It was meaningless. Whatever god's disposition, a bullet through the head is not likely to inspire a miracle.

TAPE ENDS

