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Is monotheism bad for you?: some reflections on God, the Bible, and life in the light of Regina Schwartz's *The Curse of Cain*

R. W. L. MOBERLY

Introduction

I recently came across an issue of *The Spectator* in which Jasper Griffin has an essay 'The Jealousy of God', which is advertised on the front cover as being about 'the intolerance of monotheism'.[1] Griffin notes how unusual in antiquity was the monotheism which moderns tend to take for granted. The more common polytheism was, by contrast, 'intensely human', which meant that 'heaven reflected more of human life than our modern monotheisms can do' (which Griffin implies was a good thing). Biblical monotheism is (apparently) a 'living on' of the pharaoh Akhenaten's heretical innovation which Egyptian priests successfully squashed, but which has survived and come to full flowering in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Griffin's historical tour ends with triumphant Christianity in imperial Rome intolerantly suppressing paganism:

> And so the course was set. Great as the triumphs are of the Religions of the Book, marvellous as we find their literatures, their architecture and their philosophy, they have all retained, more or less, that exclusive and fiery intolerance, born in the harsh setting of the Near Eastern deserts, and living on, to our fearful cost, in Palestine and Kosovo, Afghanistan and Nanterre, Belfast and the World Trade Center. There was, after all, something to be said for the pagan days, when a new god could be signed up and expected to fit in with all the rest, in a spirit rather like that in which a soccer club transfers a star player from another team.

Not dissimilar are the views of prize-winning novelist Philip Pullman. In a recent interview,[2] the interviewer addresses Pullman's apparent antipathy towards God and the Church in his novels and elicits the following answer as to the source of Pullman's attitude:

> Well, all right, it comes from history. It comes from the record of the Inquisition, persecuting heretics and torturing Jews and all that sort of stuff; and it comes from the other side, too, from the Protestants burning the Catholics. It comes from the insensate pursuit of innocent and crazy old women, and from the Puritans in America burning and hanging the witches – and it comes not only from the Christian Church but also from the Taliban.

[1] 'The Jealousy of God', *The Spectator* vol. 288, no. 9062 (13 April 2002), 16–18.
[2] *Third Way* 25/2 (April, 2002), 22–6; reprinted in *Church Times* of 5 April 2002, 14–15.

Every single religion that has a monotheistic god ends up by persecuting other people and killing them because they don't accept him. Wherever you look in history, you find that. It's still going on.

The issue has also been addressed by the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks.[3] His article begins:

Since September 11, many reflective people have wondered whether there is something not just about fundamentalism but about religion itself, specifically monotheism, that gives rise to violence in the name of God. This is an old claim but an important one, and we must face it honestly.

The issue may be, in certain ways, a barometer of our contemporary intellectual and cultural context. In the seventeenth century, the time when (arguably) modernity was born and when (unarguably) the term 'monotheism' was first coined,[4] 'monotheism' was considered a self-evident good, the pinnacle of religious and philosophical insight, a yardstick by which other positions could be measured. But in our contemporary postmodern context the wisdom (if such it was) of our modern forebears is no longer considered self-evident.[5] Griffin and Pullman articulate what is an increasingly common outlook. Although one could reasonably suggest that their reading of history is selective, and that their implicit understanding of the relationship between monotheistic affirmation and public practice is underdeveloped, such observations are in a sense beside the point. What is at stake is an intellectual mood, a way of thinking, that wishes to distance itself from one of the most basic of the understandings that shaped modern western culture, an understanding which has usually retained some lingering respect from that culture as being in principle positive even as it has generally ceased to command adherence.

Exposition of Schwartz's thesis

It is in this context that we need to consider Regina Schwartz's *The Curse of Cain*.[6] The book is something of a *tour de force*, relatively brief and readily readable.[7] It comes with impressive commendations on its back jacket; Walter Brueggemann

[3] 'Credo', *The Times*, 20 April 2002.

[4] 'Monotheism' as a term was coined by the Cambridge Platonist, Henry More, in 1660, at about the time when the terms 'deism' and 'theism' were first introduced into scholarly and popular parlance. For the possible significance of the coinage, see Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'* (Cambridge, 1996), especially ch. 1.

[5] In the eighteenth century David Hume became the godfather of those who today argue that monotheism is intolerant and violent. In that context he was still very much swimming against the tide, but his work is a useful warning against any over-tidy distinguishing between modern and postmodern. See especially his *The Natural History of Religion* (1757), ch. IX, where we read, for example: 'The intolerance of almost all religions, which have maintained the unity of God, is as remarkable as the contrary principle of polytheists.' I am grateful to my colleague Colin Crowder for this reference.

[6] Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: the Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago and London, 1997).

[7] Some of its content in its formative stages was delivered in Cambridge in the 'Theology and Postmodernism Lectures' (p. xiv).

says it is 'a stunningly important book'[8] while Rowan Williams describes it as 'passionate and exhilarating . . . brilliant and provocative'.

The book's subtitle, 'The Violent Legacy of Monotheism' (together with a cover picture of a detail from Titian in which Cain is violently murdering Abel), suggests from the outset the general tenor of Schwartz's thesis. In brief, Schwartz propounds a thesis about the nature of identity, primarily collective identity, in the ancient and modern worlds. She sees the characteristic modern construal of collective identity as operating with categories inherited from the Bible,[9] categories determined by monotheism and its corollaries, categories which endure even when secularized. Unfortunately, these categories are pernicious. They arise out of fantasy, and they entail violence and exclusion towards those whose identity is other; identity, in biblical categories, is at someone else's expense. So destructive are the Bible's categories – 'its ancient agonistic values are far too dangerous to continue authorizing' (p. 176) – that Schwartz proposes escaping them through the most radical expedient possible, to replace them by rewriting them:

> To open the biblical canon is my concluding call, and by that I do not mean some partial commentary of sanctified unalterable authoritative texts, but a genuine rewriting of traditions: new creation stories, new exoduses, new losses, and new recoveries of what is lost. (p. 175)

When Schwartz says at the outset, 'I make some strong claims' (p. x), she is not understating.

Schwartz develops her thesis around a basic polarity between two different, and incompatible, visions of life (a kind of reworking of Moses' saying, 'I have set before you life and death', Deut. 30:15–20). The key terms for her polarity are *scarcity* and *plenitude*. The vision of scarcity is 'When everything is in short supply, it must all be competed for – land, prosperity, power, favor, even identity itself' (p. xi), while plenitude is the opposite, a vision that there is 'enough for everyone . . . the challenge of living with the assumption, despite evidence to the contrary, that each will have his basic needs met' (p. 35). Certain other terms cluster around: with scarcity goes violence, exclusion, coercion, singleness, while with plenitude goes co-operation, reconciliation, multiplicity. The trouble is that biblical monotheism is characteristically linked with a vision of scarcity, and that is why it is so pernicious: it encourages violence against others in order to make secure both restrictive identity and limited resources. To be sure, visions of plenitude are occasionally linked with the biblical deity, as particularly in the story of the manna (pp. xi, 35–6; cf. pp. 117–19), but they are marginal both in themselves and in their imaginative influence in comparison with the principle of scarcity.

[8] Further, in the review of Schwartz's book from which this phrase is taken (*Theology Today* 54 (1997–8), 535–7), Brueggemann says, 'I cannot remember when I have been as much instructed by a book in my field as I have been by this one.' His sole criticism is that 'Schwartz operates with a deeply reductionistic view of monotheism.'

[9] Schwartz's roots are Jewish (p. x), so she uses 'Bible' in a Jewish sense, even though her self-description is 'secularist' (p. 6). The New Testament is not included within her discussion.

Despite, however, Schwartz's tendency to write disparagingly about the Bible,[10] a case could be made that her programme of promoting 'an alternative Bible that subverts the dominant vision of violence and scarcity with an ideal of plenitude and its corollary ethical imperative of generosity' (p. 176) may in effect be an extreme kind of *Sachkritik*, rescuing and promoting the Bible's truest voice (since visions of plenitude can be found within its pages) from those inferior voices that otherwise overlay and obscure it. The suggestion of such *Sachkritik* could be supported by the way in which she also suggests that the characteristic inconsistency of the Bible[11] may in fact point to an understanding of truth different from that which biblically rooted faiths have usually held, but one which nonetheless can be freshly appreciated in our contemporary context:

> Stories are competing, with one that emerges as right, another as wrong, only when there is one truth. But when Truth itself is reconceived, understood as proliferating, it becomes truths, or better, stories, that illuminate and enrich each other with their variety and multiplicity rather than being partial installments of the one true story. Multiple accounts become compatible instead of competing, and difference is not agonistic because it is not fixed. Conflict is only generated by the familiar commitment to One. Creativity is generated by the Many. (p. 173)

Schwartz's thesis is worked out in a series of chapters that look at identity and its implications in the Hebrew scriptures from a variety of angles. Although the form of the argument is always set in terms of interpreting the Hebrew text, her primary concern is not really exegetical in any traditional sense, nor does she consider the history of reception as that is usually understood. Rather, her concern is to highlight problematic *contemporary* assumptions whose roots can be argued to lie deep within biblical assumptions because of the privileged transmission of the Bible within western culture. At least two related aspects of her approach merit notice. On the one hand, she consistently resists modern attempts to rationalize the biblical narrative, especially that of the conquest of Palestine, and to transpose it into different categories. For what concerns her is not questions of ancient history but of the imaginative impact of the biblical narrative upon western culture – that is, its enduring mythic significance. She quotes with approval from Robert Allen Warrior's powerful account of the damaging effects of the biblical narratives of exodus and conquest: 'People who read the narratives read them as they are, not as scholars and experts would like them to be read and interpreted. History is no longer with us. The narrative remains.'[12]

[10] For example, Exod. 6:2–8 is an 'extraordinarily clumsy passage' (p. 59); the conquest narrative 'is only a wild fantasy written by a powerless dispossessed people' (p. 57); despite the evident delight in the land of Israel evinced by Deuteronomy (11:10–15; cf. 8:7–9), 'it was a notably poor, drought-plagued land' (p. 47).

[11] For example, 'In this, as in most things, the Bible is inconsistent' (p. 193 n. 54).

[12] Pp. 61–2; the quotation is from 'A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians', in R. S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (London, 1991), pp. 287–95 (290). The essay originally appeared in *Christianity and Crisis* 49/12 (1989), and it has since been reprinted again in David Jobling, Tina Pippin, Ronald Schleifer (eds.), *The Postmodern Bible Reader* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 188–94; it is becoming something of a modern

On the other hand, modern western culture, especially American culture, is a constant implicit, and sometimes explicit, factor in the whole presentation. This is well summarized in the Preface:

> Scarcity is encoded in the Bible as a principle of Oneness (one land, one people, one nation) and in monotheistic thinking (one deity), it becomes a demand of exclusive allegiance that threatens with the violence of exclusion. When that thinking is translated into secular formations about people, 'one nation under God' becomes less comforting than threatening. (p. xi)

Throughout the book, comparable comments, especially at the end of sections, keep the focus on the Bible's pernicious legacy in view: 'The tentacles of the injunction "you shall have no other gods before me" reach throughout *our* social formations, structuring identity as a delimited possession with a remarkable grip' (p. 69, my italics); 'Whatever communities are, they are not a body, and imagining corporate identity as corporeal – as defined by blood and by seed – has served racial, ethnic, and religious hatred all too well throughout history' (p. 97).

The result of all this is a clear strategy, a practical purpose for the book's thesis: it is to disable the Bible from uses to which it is, or has been, characteristically put, and so to clear the way for rethinking the structures of contemporary life. On her own account Schwartz is

> pursuing a strategy of reading the Bible that makes any single consistent ideological viewpoint difficult to defend. Such a strategy makes it difficult to use the Bible as a political club. Even more to the point (the point being the relation of the Bible to contemporary political urgency), a work composed, assembled, and edited some two to three thousand years ago in an altogether remote cultural context is unlikely to address current political crises directly, whether apartheid in South Africa, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, or racism in the United States. All that having been said, however, it does remain true that millions of people imagine that biblical narratives do just that – function as direct commentaries on their immediate lives – and they claim the Bible has the authority to do so. (p. 103)

Although the notion of people supposing that the Bible directly addresses contemporary political conflicts reads strangely in a British context, I presume that it is more recognizable in an American context, and that it probably has the Religious Right (or perhaps some forms of Zionism) in view.[13] In any case, Schwartz's

classic. Warrior is an Osage Indian, who reads the biblical narratives of exodus and conquest from the perspective of the Canaanites because he draws parallels with the history of Native Americans in modern American history. His essay is a prime example of an approach to the Bible which deliberately resists sharing the assumptions made by the biblical writers, but rather opposes them in the name of human integrity. Since Schwartz speaks autobiographically of how it was during her teaching of the exodus story that a student's question, 'What about the Canaanites?', had a kind of converting effect upon her handling of the biblical text (pp. ix–x), we are here at the heart of Schwartz's concerns.

[13] I find it odd that Schwartz conflates the idea that the Bible addresses current political crises with the idea that it comments on people's immediate lives. For this latter can be, and daily is, realized in a wide range of moral, spiritual, and practical ways by millions of believers more or less independently of views about contemporary politics. Moreover, on political issues there is a greater diversity of modes of appropriating Scripture than Schwartz allows for: South Africa has seen not only Afrikaner apartheid, but also Archbishop Tutu's chairing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; and is Schwartz unfamiliar with Abraham Lincoln's use of biblical motifs in his speeches?

overall concern seems clear. Once one has shown how problematic, indeed morally reprehensible, are characteristic biblical assumptions, even when secularized in the modern world,[14] one is furthering the cause of envisaging and embodying contemporary social and political reality in alternative, more morally positive (reconciling, generous) ways.

Critique of Schwartz's thesis

Schwartz has many keen insights that should unsettle any complacency in thinking about contemporary issues of identity formation and their possible relationship to a biblical frame of reference. It would be unfortunate if someone who wished to resist most of Schwartz's thesis – as I do – should do so out of any kind of unconcern for some of the deep and difficult issues that she raises. Moreover, the multifaceted nature of her thesis makes it difficult to know how best to engage with it – how far one should operate at the level of the specifics of biblical interpretation, how far at the level of basic philosophical assumptions, how far in terms of contemporary socio-political analysis and prescription, and how far in terms of this or that within her argument. I will attempt to focus on at least some of the salient issues.

Curious errors

First, at the risk of appearing merely to nitpick, let me briefly mention two small oddities (from among others) which raise questions about the accuracy of Schwartz's handling of the biblical text.[15] (i) We are told that the Hebrew Bible imagines communities as nations 'demarcated by the worship of different deities' such that 'the Ammonites are those who worship Milcom . . . Egyptians those who worship Pharaoh' (p. 121). But the Egyptians are not thus depicted in the Hebrew Bible (nor in their own literature). (ii) We are told that the Hebrew term *nābāl* ('fool') is 'most consistently used for an adulterer, and it is explicit in the episode that follows David's adultery, where his son Amnon rapes Tamar, echoing David "taking" Bathsheba' (p. 139). Yet *nābāl* does not consistently refer to an adulterer, and Tamar's use of the term for Amnon (2 Sam. 13:12,13) is about a sexual violation whose significance (for Tamar as speaker) is not predicated upon possible readerly parallels between David and Amnon.

[14] One might say, though Schwartz herself does not, that the secularizing of biblical assumptions makes correction of possible distortions the more difficult, because the various critical checks that function within the biblical context, and in communities that explicitly hold themselves accountable to Scripture, are much less likely to be able to function in a secularized context.

[15] To be sure, Schwartz disarmingly says of herself, 'I come to the Bible as an outsider, and have leaned heavily upon the learning and help of the experts, with the hope that they will forgive the mistakes an interloper inevitably makes' (p. xiv). Certainly. But the larger the claims an outsider/interloper makes (especially when published by a distinguished university press and accompanied by glowing recommendations from senior scholars), the less she can reasonably expect tolerance for mistakes. One possible example of inaccurate second-hand knowledge of scholarly debate is the claim, with regard to the complex process of the Bible's codification: 'the first block of material came together at the Babylonian Exile, the next at the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in A.D. 70' (pp. 145–6).

Selective use of the biblical text

Schwartz's reading of the Bible is selective in the kind of way that risks qualifying as tendentious; her handling of the text is open to some of the same criticisms as are commonly levelled against the kind of 'fundamentalist' approach she so abhors. So, for example, although she regularly associates terms such as 'violence' and 'exclusion' with the biblical deity, I cannot recollect (though I may have missed) any use at all of terms such as 'grace', 'mercy' or 'compassion'.[16] In other words, that understanding of the divine nature which the Hebrew scriptures themselves highlight – for the affirmation that the deity is merciful and gracious is set on the lips of YHWH himself to Moses on Mount Sinai, in the context of Israel's faithlessness (Exod. 34:6–7), and is rehearsed regularly elsewhere within the canonical collection – disappears from view. One could reasonably expect *something* to be said about so basic an emphasis, not least since God's gracious dealings with Israel in particular precisely parallel his gracious dealings with the world in general (in the Flood narrative, Gen. 6–9), where in each context he resolves to accommodate human sin and wilfulness within his gracious purposes.[17]

Alternatively, Schwartz appeals to the divine provision of manna (Exod. 16) as giving a glimmer of a 'monotheism . . . not entangled with scarcity but with an ideal of plenitude, [which] offers a God who does not set limits but who provides', for in the narrative 'the man who gathered more had not too much, the man who gathered less had not too little'; this suggests an ethical pedagogy 'predicated upon an infinite rain of bread from the heavens' over against the Decalogue that reintroduces an ethic of scarcity (pp. 36–7). But is such a reading fair to the text? The text's own contextualization of the divine provision is as a test of obedience to *torah* (Exod. 16:4b), and its primary purpose is to inculcate a discipline of daily obedience (the point of the manna rotting, vv. 19–20, is not to prevent greed as such, as Schwartz suggests, but rather to inhibit attempts to circumvent the daily discipline by gathering enough for several days at once); the daily discipline is underlined by the different nature of the manna on the eve of the sabbath, when enough for two days can be gathered at once so that obedience to the sabbath is not transgressed (vv. 22–30). If, in possible response, Schwartz were to argue that she is trying to rescue the good bits of the text from its distorting context (a kind of *Sachkritik*), one would have to ask how this should be differentiated from a

[16] Jonathan Sacks (see n. 3) argues – against the linkage of monotheism with violence – that the prophetic vision of peace as an ideal was an astonishing leap of moral imagination which is 'inseparable from monotheism. As long as gods were tribal, conflict was endemic to mankind . . . Only when people began to think of a single God of all mankind was it possible to think of peace as an ultimate aim . . . If monotheism is true then we are all one family under the parenthood of God. No parent wishes his or her children to fight among themselves.' Prophetic visions of peace do not feature in Schwartz's discussion, though of course she might respond in the kind of terms that Norman Gottwald uses: 'Monotheism has encouraged a worldwide vision of peace and justice, while simultaneously nurturing the belief that "we" monotheists – of a particular type – are the sole or superior carriers of that peace and justice, all too easily dividing the world into "us" and "them"' (*The Politics of Ancient Israel* (Louisville, 2001), p. 251).

[17] For the structural and conceptual parallelism between the Sinai and Flood narratives, see my *At the Mountain of God* (SJSOT 22; Sheffield, 1983), pp. 90–2.

Procrustean use of the text – which in any case would transgress her principle that people read the narratives as they are, not as scholars and experts would like them to be read.

God as a human projection

There are questions to be asked about the categories through which Schwartz's thesis is advanced. She is certainly aware of some possible difficulties. On the one hand, the relationship between monotheism and social practice is recognized not to be straightforward: 'Politics are not hardwired into theology, and the relation between monotheism and the social order is not simple. It can and has been variously conceived: as homologous . . . as antithetical . . . as generative . . . ' (p. 16). Whether this diversity is in fact recognized consistently in her argument is a moot point, but at least the problem is acknowledged. On the other hand, Schwartz recognizes some of the problems in the use of the term 'monotheism',[18] at least in relation to the probably complex religious history underlying the Hebrew scriptures, and opts for the term essentially for reasons of convenience because of 'customary usage' (p. 17).

But one thing she (like Griffin and Pullman) simply takes for granted, so obvious that it needs no discussion, is that all language about God is a human projection: 'God' is a coded embodiment of some of the most fundamental of human aspirations and priorities. Thus, if one can change the 'God' code, one changes thereby the self-understanding of human life. What I miss is any sense of what is traditionally called 'revelation', that is the understanding that Israel's depiction of God is, whatever the elements of human construction and imagination within it, a construction of that which is antecedently given by a transcendent reality and which is fundamentally constrained by that antecedent givenness. There is thus, on one level, an obvious kind of response for believers to make to Schwartz's complaint about the depiction of God in the Hebrew scriptures – whether or not one 'likes' the depiction of God is in certain important senses beside the point. For there is, irrespective of human preference, a mysterious reality with which humans have to do, which they do not have power or liberty to change (however much they may indeed have freedom of interpretation and exploration within certain limits), and which they ignore at peril of self-deception and blindness; when, however, this reality is rightly understood and responded to, it is good and gracious beyond imagining. To make this point is not in any way to deny that there still remains a close connection between an understanding of God and human self-understanding and practice, but rather to see the related understandings, when biblically formed, as raising questions of truth which need a different kind of discussion from anything Schwartz allows for. All this, of course, remains compatible with gross misunderstanding

[18] There are many more problems with the term than Schwartz mentions. See my 'How Appropriate Is "Monotheism" as a Category for Biblical Interpretation?', in L. T. Stuckenbruck and W. Sproston-North (eds.), *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* (SJSNT 263; London and New York, 2004), pp. 216–34.

and malpractice in the historic appropriation of the legacy of Israel's scriptures. Nonetheless the resultant argument would look rather different, if the central issue became the constant struggle faithfully to understand, appropriate and embody a given reality. Those, therefore, for whom issues of 'revelation' and appropriate human response ('faith' in Christian categories) are significant may quite properly take issue with some of the basic structuring assumptions of Schwartz's thesis.

Reading the Bible in Christian contexts

There are some problematic assumptions which Schwartz makes about the use of the Bible which need some highlighting and critique. These may be approached via her point that people read the narratives 'as they are' in terms of their intrinsic imagery and assumptions rather than in terms of scholarly reconstructions of ancient history. This is indeed true in many ways, but it obscures the fact that it is only a rather modern (and vigorously contested) idea that one should read the Hebrew scriptures on their own in isolation from the interpretative contexts provided by both Judaism and Christianity. Historically, when most Jews and Christians have read the narratives within the Hebrew scriptures they have *not* read them 'as they are', if by this is meant: in isolation from an interpretative frame of reference which prioritizes some things and downplays others and which may thereby affect a reading in more than one way. The readerly imagination which may be (more or less) unaffected by the latest findings of ancient history may still be greatly affected by a whole range of imaginative concerns, often of a moral and theological kind, from the astonishingly rich heritage of Jewish and Christian use of Scripture.

On the one hand, despite the appalling militarism and violence which have often disfigured Christian history, many Christians down the ages have been well aware of the difficulties posed for their faith by the 'plain sense' of the exodus and conquest narratives in the Old Testament. Origen, for example, took it as axiomatic, in the light of the New Testament, that the biblical text has to be read metaphorically in terms of moral and spiritual warfare:

> Without doubt both the wars fought by Joshua and the slaughters of kings and enemies are to be construed as a shadow and type of heavenly things – of those wars, that is, which our Lord Jesus fights with his army and officers, that is with nations of believers and their leaders against the devil and his angels . . . We shall not fight as those of old fought, nor are our battles on earth against people, but against the principalities, and against the powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world. So now you know where conflicts of this sort are to be fought by you.[19]

More specifically, the locus of this spiritual battle is moral struggle within the human heart:

[19] *Homilies on Joshua* XII:1 (*PG* 12, cols. 886–7). My translation.

> Therefore, following the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we read those things we too arm ourselves and rouse ourselves for battle, but against those enemies which come forth from our heart, evil thoughts, thefts . . . and other enemies of our soul that are like them. We try, following what this scripture relates, if possible not to leave any that might recover or revive. For if we shall have overcome these enemies, we will properly overcome spiritual powers also, and we shall drive them out from their kingdom which they have established within us on the basis of our vices.[20]

In the wake of Origen, a tendency to read the narratives metaphorically – a move usually called 'spiritualizing' – has been strongly characteristic of Christian interpretation of the Old Testament more generally. It is a pleasing irony that modern scholarship has almost (though not quite!) come full circle with Origen. For if, as a reasonable consensus of scholars now holds, the conquest narrative in Joshua is primarily an ideological and theological construct from perhaps the time of Josiah or of the exile – and so is not, and was not intended to be, anything like 'history' in our modern sense (though also the narrative is not accurately depicted by Schwartz's preferred term 'fantasy') – then it suggests that the narrative should indeed be read metaphorically, as a paradigm of some of the issues of living faithfully and unfaithfully in the light of *torah*, which is to be realized not on the battlefield but within the daily life of Israel.

Alternatively, what of Deuteronomy which sets the agenda for Joshua? Schwartz appeals more than once to Deut. 7:2–5, the injunction to lay inhabitants of Canaan under the ban, and comments: 'This certainly sounds like Cowboys against Indians, Israel against Canaan, Us against Them, and it also sounds like a recommendation that the solution to the conflict is to murder the inhabitants and settle their land' (p. 158). Yet how was this text heard by, for example, the Fathers? If a recently published overview of patristic commentary is a reliable guide, they appear to have been little interested in this text.[21] Of the two Fathers cited, Cassian, in Origen's footsteps, appeals to Paul that 'all the things that happened to [Israel] in a figure were written for our instruction', and so the seven nations in Deut. 7:1 represent vices, and they are so numerous because vices are more numerous than virtues. As with Joshua, this may not in essence be qualitatively different from a possible intrinsic significance of the text as metaphorical. Content is given to *ḥērem* ('putting under the ban') by two things, a ban on intermarriage and the destruction of religious objects, neither of which specifies the taking of life, and the former

[20] *Homilies on Joshua* XIV:1 (*PG* 12, col. 892). My translation.

[21] In Joseph T. Lienhard (ed.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, III: *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, 2001), there are only two entries on Deuteronomy 7 (pp. 286–7). In addition to Cassian (*Conference* 5.16.1–2), Augustine is cited with reference to the destruction of altars in 7:5, 'When you have received lawful authority, do all this. Where authority has not been given to us, we don't do it . . . Many pagans have these abominations on their estates. Do we march in and smash them? The first thing we try to do is to break the idols in their hearts. When they too become Christians, they either invite us in to perform this good work or else they get in first with it before us. The thing we have to do now is pray for them, not get angry with them' (*Sermon* 62.17).

of which could not be an issue if lives were taken. Most probably, therefore, the text 'in itself' is meant to be construed metaphorically: 'Not a "mere" metaphor, for practical action is still envisaged; but it is action of a narrow and specific kind, relating to two issues which become representative of religious fidelity, dedication to God, as a whole.'[22]

On one level, to be sure, the recognition of the possibly metaphorical significance of the texts about *ḥērem* warfare in Deuteronomy and Joshua would not diminish Schwartz's concerns about the construction of identity as involving boundaries which exclude some as 'Other'. Yet much of the rhetorical force of her argument depends on imagining actual acts of exclusion, violence and warfare towards others. If the concern of the texts is an internal issue within Israel, how to maintain practices of faithfulness towards YHWH, and if they have regularly been construed in terms of moral and spiritual struggle, then questions of identity and 'the Other' are not indeed resolved; but the nature of the argument is significantly transposed.

The use of the Hebrew scriptures in relation to issues of the construction and maintenance of identity also looks different when the whole Christian canon is taken into account. Schwartz's key concern is identity, and the way in which in the Hebrew scriptures Israel's identity is formed and maintained at the expense of those who are not Israel, primarily the Egyptians and the Canaanites. For the Christian, however, identity is primarily constituted in relation to God's act of salvation in Christ, supremely in his death, and resurrection. One striking aspect of the salvific death of Christ is that *it is at the expense of nobody except Christ himself* – and, by extension, God. This is not because the salvation in Christ is conceived individualistically, for the New Testament writers see Christ's death as cosmically significant; moreover they indicate that God's people, Israel, is redefined and reconstituted by this divine act and that the followers of Jesus, the Church, stand in complex continuity with Israel. But in line with the fact that Jesus' death is at no one's expense is the fact that for the people thereby constituted the distinction between Jew and Gentile ceases to be significant; and other characteristic identity differentiations based on religion, race or gender are similarly transformed.[23] The recurrent tendency (both ancient and modern) to make Christian identity in relation to others into yet one more form of conventional identity displays profound failure to grasp the logic of the death and resurrection of Jesus as it is interpreted in the New Testament, where new creation in Christ becomes *the* defining mark of identity. When this identity is rightly construed, it is not the kind of identity to be wielded over against others but is a vocation to live by grace for God and others, and thereby to give testimony to a truth about God and life which is open to all alike to receive and embrace.

[22] See my 'Toward an Interpretation of the Shema', in Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (eds.), *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs* (Grand Rapids, 1999), pp. 124–44 (135–6).

[23] The most famous texts are Pauline: 1 Cor. 1:18–2:5; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11; etc.

All of this is to say that many of the essential elements of Schwartz's preferred vision – of human identity that is not hoarding, anxious, and violent but is expressed rather in generosity, reconciliation, and openness – are already present in the New Testament.[24] This, of course, makes the recurrent failure of Christians truly to live as Christians – when they construe their faith in sub-Christian or even patently non-Christian ways – the more damaging to the possibility of their *raison d'être* being seen for what it is. It is then hardly surprising if Schwartz, along with many others, construes a biblically oriented vision of God and life as humanly damaging.[25]

The status of Schwartz's preferred vision

Schwartz's preferred vision of plenitude – life characterized by generosity instead of guarding one's turf, and multiplicity instead of exclusive identities – poses problems also in terms of understanding what its status is supposed to be. Is it utopian and thereby, perhaps, by analogy with Thomas More's original, in part a critique of contemporary culture (though More was writing at a time when new lands were being discovered and it was imaginatively possible to think of a new society starting from scratch in a way that is hardly possible today)? Is it a proposal to realize a version of the American dream (if only certain socio-political prejudices could be eradicated), since slavery and immigration have made American society more diverse than most, and no other society in history has had such material plenitude at its disposal? Or, in other terms, what prevents her preferred vision from being as much 'fantasy' as the biblical vision she seeks to displace? Or would she agree that it is no less 'fantasy', only it is morally preferable 'fantasy' because it is more generous and tolerant and so would better promote human flourishing? Again, what reason is there to think that people in our culture could indeed live in the kind of way she suggests if once the deleterious heritage of the Bible could be disposed of? Not only does Schwartz ignore divine mercy, she also has little to say about biblical law and its role in forming a society. All she has to say about the Decalogue is that, in contrast to the plenitude in the preceding manna story, it 'assume[s] a world of scarcity – a world where lying, cheating, stealing, adultery, and killing are such tempting responses to scarcity that they must be legislated against. The vision of plenitude is difficult to sustain' (p. 36).[26] Well, perhaps.

[24] Some of the elements are also more present in the Old Testament than Schwartz's exposition recognizes; cf. Sacks' observations (above, n. 16).

[25] This is not the place to try to articulate what an observant Jewish response might be. Sacks (above, n. 3) argues that Jews and Christians have had to learn the hard way, through historical experience which has brought about 'a profound inner crisis' (wars and defeats, both military and intellectual), that religion 'must never have recourse to power'. He sees this anticipated biblically in 1 Kings 19, where Elijah has to learn that God is not in the wind, the earthquake or the fire, but in the 'still small voice' – 'the still small voice of reason, compassion and peace'.

[26] Compare 'I wonder (much as Paul does in Romans) if the laws protecting men from violence against one another are not the corollary of conceiving identity in violence in the first place . . . Perhaps when we have grown weary of asserting all of our differences, we will be willing to think more of likenesses, analogies, even identifications – not to forge totality, but to endlessly compose and recompose temporary and multiple identifications' (p. 37).

But I simply cannot see how life is expected to be structured and conducted in Schwartz's vision of plenitude. Would human sin and evil somehow vanish and the material conditions of life be permanently transformed, so that people endlessly live in harmonious diversity? That would indeed be heaven – but precisely *how* is such heaven to be realized upon earth?[27] The fact that Schwartz does not see this as an issue needing mention does not inspire confidence in terms of taking her thesis seriously.[28]

Cain and Abel

Finally, it is important to look in a little detail at the prime and paradigmatic biblical narrative to which Schwartz makes appeal, and upon which her thesis is, in a certain sense, constructed: the story of Cain and Abel. At the outset of her argument Schwartz retells the story, lingering a little uncertainly on the issue of whether or not the divine rejection of Cain's sacrifice is to be rationalized, and then comes to her main point of imaginative reconstrual:

> What would have happened if [God] had accepted both Cain's and Abel's offerings instead of choosing one, and had thereby promoted cooperation between the sower and the shepherd instead of their competition and violence? What kind of God is this who chooses one sacrifice over the other? This God who excludes some and prefers others, who casts some out, is a monotheistic God – monotheistic not only because he demands allegiance to himself alone but because he confers his favour on one alone . . . We are the descendants of Cain because we too live in a world where some are cast out, a world in which whatever law of scarcity made that ancient story describe only one sacrifice as acceptable – a scarcity of goods, land, labor, or whatever – still prevails to dictate the terms of a ferocious and fatal competition. Some lose. (pp. 3–4)

Schwartz also sees the important links between Cain and Abel and Esau and Jacob, and develops this especially in a later exposition.

> That motiveless favoritism [The LORD accepting Abel and his offering, but not Cain and his offering] is precisely the point, for all we know is that, just as some unexplained scarcity makes a human father have only one blessing to confer but two sons to receive it, so some obscure scarcity motivates a divine Father to accept only one offering from two sons. The rejected son inevitably hates his brother . . . According to the biblical myth, the origins of hatred and violence among brothers is scarcity. If there is not enough to go around, then Jacob must literally impersonate Esau to get what is his, and Cain must destroy his rival to seek the favor that was Abel's. *Scarcity, the assumption that someone can only prosper when someone else does not, proliferates murderous brothers and murderous peoples. And it seems that even God, the very source of blessings, does not have enough to go around* . . . (pp. 82–3, my italics)

[27] One might put the issue this way. Given the widespread (though by no means universal) failure of Christians faithfully to embody the vision of the New Testament, even when it is believed to be not only mandated but also enabled by God himself, what likelihood is there that people will embody a demanding vision that has no greater authority than contemporary intellectual fashion?

[28] Schwartz's approach reminds me somewhat of Chairman Mao's slogan at the time of the Cultural Revolution: 'Destroy first, and construction will look after itself.' See Jung Chang, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (London, 1991), for a moving personal account of the horrors of the Cultural Revolution; chapter 15 has Mao's slogan as its title.

This is a powerful, and *prima facie* not implausible, construal. Yet I will argue that it in fact skews the biblical text.

In conceptual terms, although Schwartz never uses the technical term 'election', it is clear that it is election as much as monotheism to which she objects; and election is indeed closely linked with monotheism within the biblical literature. What, then, does election mean?[29] Schwartz's understanding could, I think, be summed up as 'inequality is unjust and promotes violence'. Yet I would suggest that the characteristic biblical understanding could be summed up primarily as 'much is expected of those to whom much is given' (cf. Lk. 12:48), but also as 'grace is amazing'. Something of the nature of the differences between Schwartz's and the biblical vision can at least in part be seen by focussing upon the two related Genesis stories.

Crucial in the Cain and Abel story is the interpretation provided by YHWH's words to Cain (Gen. 4:6–7; a passage where the Hebrew text is not straightforward, but which is not as difficult as often supposed. Many of the difficulties arise largely because the thought expressed within the text is not grasped.). Schwartz cites only the first part, ending with 'If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?', and dismissively comments, 'This sounds much like the unhelpful dictum from Exodus, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious . . . "', and thinks this 'suggest[s] that Cain has already done something wrong (even before he has) since he has been rejected' (p. 3). Yet in thinking that this looks like something to do with justifying God's rejection, she misses that the wording is looking to the future and to how Cain will respond to his situation.

The translation 'will you not be accepted?' is almost certainly inaccurate. The Hebrew reads literally, 'Is there not if you do well lifting up?' The question then becomes a matter of the idiomatic usage of the verb *nāśā'* ('lift up') – the 'lifting up' of what? Although *nāśā'* is commonly used with *'āwôn* ('guilt', 'punishment') in the sense of 'forgive'/'accept', and *nāśā'* can be used on its own with this sense (e.g. Gen. 18:24, 26), there is no need to find that idiom here. The use of *nāśā'* is contextually determined by the falling (*nāpal*) of Cain's face in the preceding narrative and immediately antecedent question: that which has fallen, namely the expression on Cain's face, can be raised again. Questions of sin and forgiveness are at this stage of the story nowhere in view.

Although Cain's face has fallen, it is possible for it to be lifted up; that is, although he has not unnaturally responded to YHWH's preference for Abel with disappointment and dejection, which is writ large in his face, this response can be reversed. It is not the case that, as Westermann puts it, 'the question implies a reproach and does not see that Cain's resentment is justified';[30] for it is perfectly possible to see a response as legitimate, inasmuch as it is an instinctive reaction,

[29] Schwartz shows no awareness of Jon D. Levenson's groundbreaking study, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: the Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven and London, 1993), which was published four years before her book and is, in effect, a study of the relationship between monotheism and election.

[30] C. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11* (Minneapolis and London, 1984; ET from German original of 1974), p. 299.

and yet to point beyond it to a deeper response that transcends instinct. How might this come about? The initial 'if you do well' is non-specific but probably means 'if you handle this situation in the right way'. What this might involve is as yet unclear; but it at least offers the possibility and the hope that the response of resentment need not be final but can be transformed.

There is, however, an alternative. Cain can fail to handle the situation in the right way. In this case there is a frightening prospect: sin is at the door like an animal which is 'lying down' (*rōbēṣ*). The image here may be of an animal making its lair or lying quietly, where the point would be the proximity and constant latent threat of danger; alternatively it is possible that the image is of crouching, presumably because the animal is preparing to leap upon its prey for which it is hungry. Either way, this animal would regard Cain as its prey ('for you is its desire'). Yet even so, the danger posed by this animal (representing the sin that arises if Cain fails to handle the situation rightly) does not lead to a foregone conclusion, namely that it would devour Cain. Rather, there would be a struggle in which Cain could gain mastery over the animal.[31] The fact that, as the story continues, he immediately succumbs to the animal and murders his brother does not mean that things could not have been otherwise.

The overall tenor of God's warning to Cain is thus well put by Jon Levenson:

> The resentment that this inequality provokes need not prove fatal; sin, crouching beast-like at the door, need not overwhelm; the brother whose offering has not been regarded can still live in dignity – if only he masters the urge to even the score, that is, to pursue equality where God has acted according to the opposite principle, with divine inequality. The warning locates the source of the crime in the criminal himself: it is not God's favoring Abel that will bring about the murder, but rather Cain's inability to accept a God who authors these mysterious and inequitable acts of choosing.[32]

The fundamental issue at stake for Cain in Levenson's account is indeed that upon which Schwartz fastens: 'What Cain cannot bear is a world in which distributive justice is not the highest principle and not every inequity is an iniquity.'[33] Yet in the rest of the story, which Schwartz passes over in brief summary only to make the point that the first murderer becomes the first outcast (p. 3), it is striking that God continues to speak at length to Cain, that the justice which might naturally be meted out to Cain for his murder is not forthcoming, and that Cain is even protected against casual assault. Here there is apparently an outworking of mercy. As Levenson puts it:

> Cain does learn that the arbitrariness of God has its positive side, that it can be realized as grace and not only as caprice . . . the symmetry of 'life for life' yields to the gracious asymmetry of exile as the penalty for murder . . . [Cain] survives by the grace of God – ironically, the very principle that evoked his murderous impulse in the first place.[34]

[31] The precise translation of *timšol* is unclear because of the lack of modal auxiliaries in Hebrew. Is it 'will' or 'may' or 'must' master? The first of these is the least likely, and the last probably the most likely. There is a fine probing of the issue in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*.

[32] *Death*, pp. 74–5. [33] Ibid., p. 75. [34] Ibid.

The pattern of Cain and Abel is the pattern also of Esau and Jacob. Yet there are both similarities and differences. The prime similarity is the divine favouring of Jacob over Esau, where the fact that this is made known to Rebecca while the twins are still within her womb (Gen. 25:22–4) must decisively show that it is misguided to seek to rationalize the divine choice in terms of anything good or bad that is done by its recipients (as is underlined by Paul, Rom. 9:10–13).[35] The prime difference is the response of Esau to his displacement by his younger brother. In the key story of the blessing which Jacob steals, Esau's initial response is a grief and desolation which can hardly fail to move the reader (Gen. 27:38). This is the instinctive response, analogous to the falling of Cain's face; and it is, unsurprisingly, closely followed by hatred and murderous intent towards Jacob who consequently leaves home for a long time (27:41–5). Yet many years later (that part of the story which Schwartz does not mention), when Jacob returns home still deeply fearful of what Esau might do to him and hoping to buy him off (32:3–21) – until his plans are overtaken by the mysterious wrestling at Peniel – Esau's response confounds all expectation: Esau tearfully embraces and welcomes Jacob (33:4).[36] For the Christian there can be no greater approbation of Esau's welcome than that its terminology and gestures are those with which the father welcomes home the prodigal son in Jesus' parable (Lk. 15:20). In other words, although we are told nothing about Esau during the years of Jacob's absence, Esau has spectacularly done what Cain utterly failed to do: he has mastered the beast of resentment which was wanting to devour him. The meaning and purpose of YHWH's initial words to Cain are here realized.

The significance of what is at stake here can be further appreciated if we prescind for a moment from Israel's Scripture and theological formulations. One of the most striking things about life in general is the inequities which characterize it, inequities which often are intrinsic rather than socially constructed, and which often pertain to those things that matter most to people.[37] On the one hand, intelligence and beauty are unequal endowments from the womb onwards (the very best nurture can only mitigate rather than remove a poor endowment from nature).[38] On the other hand, life is often marked by disappointments in love and health: A's love for B is not reciprocated, and C wastes away with debilitating illness while D healthily goes from strength to strength. Such difficult life situations may have

[35] In Paul's theology election plays a role different (in important respects) from that in the Genesis narratives.

[36] Although the precise tone of the subsequent exchanges is difficult to catch (33:5–17), there is insufficient reason to suppose that Esau's generous-sounding gestures should be suspiciously construed.

[37] The discussion that follows is focussed entirely on those inequities which may be more or less unchangeable but whose effects can be transformed. The need to endure, and morally overcome, such inequities is not a counsel to adopt passivity in the face of social, economic, religious, or political injustices which need to be confronted; in such contexts the biblical injunctions to practise justice and righteousness must be given their full scope.

[38] To be sure, medical intervention can increasingly make a major difference to at least some perceived bodily defects. Unsurprisingly, this makes people unwilling to endure what can be changed. Yet it is unlikely that more than a small percentage of people worldwide will ever be able to take advantage of such medical facilities.

nothing whatever to do with a person's qualities or deserts. Moreover, one can be an undeserving recipient of many kinds of injustice: A is swindled out of money; B is passed over for promotion; C's daughter is raped and murdered by drunken thugs. In addition to such individual situations there are also wider socio-cultural contexts – marked by such things as warfare, famine, endemic disease, economic depression – which, even if often humanly caused and still open to being changed, may still make life problematic without regard to the desires, choices, or deserts of most of those who live in such contexts.

All such situations are inequitable, and all instinctively and naturally give rise to at least disappointment and often stronger feelings of resentment and bitterness; and resentment and bitterness are cancers of the heart and mind that can become more deeply destructive of life even than the carcinogenic illness. In all such situations there is a natural tendency to ask 'Why me (us)?', 'What have I (we) done to deserve this?' Yet such questions are usually fruitless and unanswerable. The possibly fruitful questions are such as 'What is to be done about this?', 'What is to be made of this?', 'What resources are there to live constructively through this?' There is also a natural and widespread recognition that those who do somehow overcome undeserved adversity – the Helen Kellers of the world – enrich and deepen the nature and meaning of human life in ways otherwise inaccessible.

The close parallel between the theological issue in the stories of Cain and Abel and Esau and Jacob and the basic human issue in these common everyday situations should be apparent. In each context the retrospective question 'Why?', in the sense of trying to rationalize or justify the situation, is misplaced, for the inequity is intrinsically beyond rationalization. Yet each context poses a fundamental forward-looking choice: not the choice to act in a free and independent way in adopting a lifestyle or acquiring consumer goods, but rather the choice of how to respond to an unwelcome and unchosen situation – to respond in either a life-enhancing or a life-destroying way.

There are, of course, other important issues to address about the relationship between the biblical stories and the everyday situations. Perhaps most important is the way one is to conceive of the divine initiative and action, which is expressed in the Genesis narratives in an unambiguous and directed way that may be difficult to transfer to other contexts. There is also the question of how one should envisage the resources of the unfavoured person, the Cain or Esau, for mastering the beast of resentment: whence should they come, and how might they relate to the divine initiative and action? These issues are too substantial to be properly addressed here, so (at the risk of oversimplification) I will briefly draw on two axioms of biblically derived Christian theology which could enable a fuller account to be given. First, a belief in divine providence is a belief that nothing that happens, even that which most defies rationalization (whether theological or other), is outside or beyond the purposes of God; and so no situation is beyond the possibility of some kind of good coming from it.[39] Such a belief, when rightly understood, has trust as its

[39] This formulation of course elides the directedness of divine responsibility for the problematic situation in the first place. Within Genesis, however, the formulation might perhaps not be inappropriate for the Joseph narrative in chs. 37–50.

correlate and is a belief that always needs to grow and be deepened experientially. Secondly, grace is active even where unrecognized[40] (which does not deny that recognition of, and explicit drawing upon, grace still deeply matters). Since grace enables human life to become most truly itself, the moral struggle to overcome resentment and bitterness cannot be other than a process of engagement with grace, and a moral victory is not other than a triumph of grace.

Conclusion

The possible implications of the biblical vision of God, both intrinsically and as posed by Schwartz, are so vast that an essay such as this can only offer a few brief pointers. My objections to Schwartz's thesis about the malign heritage of the biblical vision can perhaps be summarized under two headings. On the one hand, first and foremost, she tends to misread and misrepresent the biblical vision both on its own terms and in relation to its modes of characteristic Jewish and Christian reception and appropriation.[41] On the other hand, her philosophical and existential dislike of what she sees in the Bible and its heritage is more negative than positive and offers no clear and substantial alternative (despite her rhetoric about the attractions of plenitude and pluralism); much of her critique is reminiscent of an eighteenth-century philosophical-cum-ethical critique of the Bible and Christian faith, yet without the eighteenth-century offer of reason as the better way.

Yet to say this should in no way entail denying, or trying to downplay, the deeply destructive practices to which advocates of the Bible have often had recourse and which have fuelled the more general suspicion of monotheism with which we started. One corollary of the principle that grace may be active even when unrecognized is that believers must be open to hear the word of God in surprising contexts. In other words, the kind of criticism of monotheistic categories that Schwartz and others articulate should not be lightly dismissed but should be taken as, in effect, a quasi-prophetic challenge to rediscover a vocation and pattern of living that is truer to the total biblical witness.[42]

In short, we are faced with differing, and substantially conflicting, understandings of reality. Schwartz's desire to envisage a more generous world will understandably resonate with many readers. Indeed, there can be few people who do not sometimes have the kind of mood so unforgettably expressed by Omar Khayyam (courtesy of Edward Fitzgerald):

[40] Compare Nicholas Lash's contention that the key to understanding the theology of Karl Rahner is to grasp that 'the possibility of experiencing grace and the possibility of experiencing grace *as* grace, are not the same thing' (*The Beginning* (see n. 4 above), p. 166).

[41] There has not been space to address the important question of the appropriateness of the interpretative categories 'scarcity' and 'plenitude'. For example, what exactly happens when theological categories such as 'election' and 'grace' are transferred into the socio-economic categories of 'scarcity' and 'plenitude'? The biblical 'economy' of divine grace operates in a way so different from egalitarian economic assumptions that the assumed translatability of the one into the other is likely to have a strongly skewing effect upon one's perceptions of either.

[42] Such a strategy has frequently been articulated in recent years with reference to other major modern critics of faith, especially Marx, Freud and Nietzsche. One attractive exposition is by Merold Westphal, *Suspicion & Faith: the Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (Grand Rapids, 1993).

> Oh Love! Could you and I with Fate conspire
> To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
> Would not we shatter it to bits – and then
> Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's desire!

Yet the biblical vision of the world under God, in which (in Levenson's neat phrasing) inequity need not be iniquity, has at least two factors in its favour. First, its realism; as noted above, life inescapably is constituted by major inequities.[43] Secondly, its wisdom; it is possible, even if demanding, to respond constructively to life's inequities, which can become the context for real moral and spiritual growth. What matters in life is to learn to live well (faithfully, uprightly, lovingly, generously) whatever one's situation is. Schwartz, and other comparable critics, have yet to persuade me that the mysterious realm of divine grace, as set out in the Bible and appropriated (with whatever deficiencies) by the faiths rooted in the Bible, does not provide (when rightly understood and implemented) the best available resource for that 'living well' which is our enduring human possibility – and our vocation from God.[44]

[43] To prevent possible misunderstanding at this point, let me reiterate n. 37.

[44] I am grateful to my wife Jennifer and to Stephen Barton for comments upon a draft of this chapter, also to responses from those who attended the Cambridge seminar.