

dominated the seas and the global economy. Similarly, after preserving its united continental base in the 1860s, the U.S. went on to eliminate its main foreign rivals in the 20th century. The two world wars and the U.S. Civil War were truly imperial conflicts in their scale, their implications, and their casualties. For almost a century after Waterloo, the British ran an empire on the cheap. They suffered the occasional setback and fought many imperial police actions. The current American imperial police actions are Iraq and Afghanistan, its major setback thus far the attack on the Twin Towers. By the standards of empire they are small beer—a horrible idea to contemplate when one has watched the awful suffering of Sept. 11 but unfortunately a true one.

In time the price of empire will grow, as it did for the British by the end of the 19th century. Above all, this entailed the emergence of foreign challenges to British global hegemony. At present, the U.S. faces no potential challengers. The European Union is its only peer and this in just one aspect of power—commerce. Europe is very unlikely ever to be a challenger in military and political terms, and in any case it shares huge common interests with the United States. China might one day be a rival but not for many years to come. For the moment, therefore, the U. S. is unchallengeable, and its ruling elites can afford to make many mistakes and wallow in a good deal of self-indulgence.

But dangers ignored now could exact a high price in 50 years' time. I hope not. Otherwise American empire and with it any sort of global order could disintegrate over my own grandchildren's heads. ■

Dominic Lieven is a professor of Russian government at the London School of Economics. His latest book is Empire: The Russian Empire and its Rivals.

Benefit of the Doubt

Good questions are better than bad answers.

By Fred Reed

WE LIVE IN A wantonly irreligious age—at least at the level of public discourse. In America the courts, the schools, and the government seek to cleanse the country of religion. More accurately, they seek to cleanse it of Christianity. We are told, never directly but by relentless implication, that religious faith is something one in decency ought to do behind closed doors—an embarrassment, worse than public bowling though not quite as bad as having a venereal disease. Which is odd.

I do not offer myself as one intimate with the gods, and on grounds of reason would be hard pressed to choose between the views of Hindus and those of Buddhists. I note, however, that over millennia people of extraordinary intellect and thoughtfulness have taken religion seriously. A quite remarkable arrogance is needed to feel oneself mentally superior to Augustine, Aquinas, Isaac Newton, and C.S. Lewis. I'm not up to it.

Of course arrogance comes in forms both personal and temporal. People tend to regard their own time as wiser and more knowing than all preceding times and the people of earlier ages as quaint and vaguely primitive. Thus many who do not know how a television works will feel superior to Newton because he didn't know how a television works. (Here is a fascinating concept: arrogance by proximity to a television.)

The world is too much with us. The nature of modernity itself engenders loss of attention to other than the pedes-

trian and merely technical. In the vast silence of the Alaskan woods in winter, or on the beach of a remote Pacific island with the waves booming endlessly in, one senses dimly something that is above our pay grade. It is harder in climate-controlled living rooms with olefin carpets and the box singing of new improved whatever that will give life meaning by making our counters spotless. The pathological sterility of the shopping mall does not conduce to reflection. And so we focus on the here and now—the problem with this being that we are only here now.

It will be said that we have learned much since the time of Newton, and that this knowledge renders us wiser on matters spiritual. We do have better plastics. Yet still we die and have no idea what it means. We do not know where we came from, and no amount of pious mummery about Big Bangs and black holes changes that at all. We do not know why we are here. We have intimations of what we should do but no assurance. These are the questions that religion addresses and that science pretends do not exist. For all our transistors we know no more about these matters than did Heraclitus—and think about them less.

Many today do know of the questions and do think about them. One merely doesn't bring them up at a cocktail party, as they are held to be disreputable.

Yet I often meet a—to me—curious sort of fellow who simply cannot com-

prehend what religion might be about. He is puzzled as distinct from contemptuous or haughty. He genuinely sees no difference between religious faith and believing that the earth is flat. He is like a congenitally deaf man watching a symphony orchestra: with all the good will in the world he doesn't see the profit in all that sawing with bows and blowing into things.

This fellow is very different from the common atheist, who is bitter, proud of his advanced thinking, and inclined toward a (somewhat adolescent) hostility to a world that isn't up to his standard. This is tiresome and predictable but doesn't offend me. Less forgivably, he often wants to run on about logical positivism. (I'm reminded of Orwell's comment about "the sort of atheist who does not so much disbelieve in God as personally dislike him.")

Critics of religion say, correctly, that horrible crimes are committed in the name of religion. So are they in the name of communism, anti-communism, Manifest Destiny, Zionism, nationalism, and national security. Horrible crimes are what people do. They are not the heart of the thing.

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The following seems to me to be true regarding religion and the sciences: either one believes that there is an afterlife or one believes that there is not an afterlife or one isn't sure—which means that one believes that there may be an afterlife.

If there is an afterlife, then there is an aspect of existence about which we

those who think themselves Christians have subordinated God to physics. For example, I have often read some timid theologian saying that manna was actually a sticky secretion deriving from certain insects and that the crossing of the Red Sea was really done in a shallow place when the wind blew the water out.

WE DO NOT KNOW WHERE WE CAME FROM, AND NO AMOUNT OF PIOUS MUMMERY ABOUT BIG BANGS AND BLACK HOLES CHANGES THAT AT ALL.

know nothing and which may, or may not, influence this world. In this case the sciences, while interesting and useful, are merely a partial explanation of things. Thus to believe in the absolute explanatory power of the sciences one must be an atheist—to exclude competition. Atheists, of course, believe what they cannot establish as much as the faithful.

Here is the chief defect of scientists (I mean those who take the sciences as an ideology rather than as a discipline): an unwillingness to admit that there is anything outside their realm. But there is. You cannot squeeze consciousness, beauty, affection, or Good and Evil from physics any more than you can derive momentum from the postulates of geometry: no mass, no momentum. A moral scientist is thus a contradiction in terms. (Logically speaking—in practice they compartmentalize and behave as well as anyone else.)

Thus we have the spectacle of the scientist who is horrified by the latest hatchet murder but can give no scientific reason why. A murder, after all, is merely the dislocation of certain physical masses (the victim's head, for example) followed by elaborate chemical reactions. Horror cannot be derived from physics. It comes from somewhere else.

Similarly, those who believe in religions often do not really quite believe. Interesting to me is the extent to which

Perhaps. I wasn't there. Yet this amounts to saying that God is all-powerful, provided that he behaves consistently with physical principles and prevailing weather. Science takes precedence.

Now, people who seek (and therefore find) an overarching explanation of everything always avoid looking at the logical warts and lacunae in their systems. This is equally true of Christians, liberals, conservatives, Marxists, evolutionists, and believers in the universal explanatory power of the sciences. Any ideology can probably be described as a systematic way of misunderstanding the world.

That being said, at worst the religions of the earth are gropings toward something people feel but cannot put a finger on, toward something more at the heart of life than the hoped-for raise, trendy restaurants, and the next and grander automobile. And few things are as stultifying and superficial as the man not so much agnostic (this I can understand) as simply inattentive, whose life is focused on getting into a better country club. Good questions are better than bad answers. And the sciences, though not intended to be, have become the opiate of the masses. ■

Fred Reed's writing has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Harper's, and National Review, among other places.

Zionism: A Defense

A prominent conservative argues that cultural and political kinship make Israel the West's natural ally.

By Peter Hitchens

CONSERVATIVES SHOULD SUPPORT the State of Israel on principle, just as the globalist Left seeks to defeat Zionism on principle. The legions of political correctness would usually approve of a state founded as the result of a classic “national liberation” struggle against a classic “colonial oppressor” and ought to endorse a country so profoundly secular in so many of its institutions and so dominated by social-democratic political and cultural thinking. Especially, they should be enthusiastic about a nation whose whole reason for existence is profoundly anti-racist.

But they don't and they aren't. The Left will readily forgive Irish Republicans for terror and even for Catholicism. They remain sentimental about Fidel Castro despite the show trials and the dungeons. They will pardon South Africa almost everything, including an incorrect attitude towards AIDS. But all the categories flip over and upside down when it comes to Israel and Zionism. Why? Here are some suggestions, offered in the spirit of inquiry.

Despite its socialist appearance—kibbutzes, female soldiers, and the rest—Zionism is a profoundly conservative idea, based on the re-creation of an ancient nation and culture. It is also globally conservative, requiring a definite and uncompromising form of national sovereignty and an implicit rejection of multiculturalism. Israel

stands—alone in its region—for placing the rule of law above the rule of power. Its destruction would be a disaster for what remains of the civilized world. Yet it has never been so threatened.

The recent Iraq war has done substantial damage to Israel's hopes of survival, damage that was implicit in the pro-war case from the start. Those Zionists who supported the war made a serious mistake. The marketers of political and diplomatic cliché have expressed surprise that George W. Bush fulfilled his earlier pledge to pursue the road map to peace. How wrong they were. Even as the doomed Abu Mazen is carted off the stage in a bruised heap, the absurd effort to find a Palestinian Authority chieftain who both has any power and believes in compromise continues. If they had been paying attention, they would have realized that the globalist faction in the Republican Party has for many years been ready to sacrifice Israel in return for a settlement with the Muslim world.

It is strange how few have put together the two most frightening events of the year 2001, even though they took place within days of each other. The first was the Durban conference of the United Nations, supposedly “against racism.” The Muslim world chose to turn this gathering into a scream of hatred against Israel and against its protector America, so much so that the U.S. and Israeli delegations walked out. Just a

few days later came the attack of Sept. 11. It has always interested me that this event was swiftly followed by, of all things, the payment of America's back dues to the UN and the first open White House declaration of support for a Palestinian state. The War on Terror was strangely irrelevant to what had actually happened, with its clumsy ill-directed blows against Afghanistan and Iraq and its embarrassed refusal to confront Saudi involvement in terror or notice Palestinian street celebrations of the Manhattan massacre.

The alteration in policy towards Israel and the amazing pressure that must have been put on Ariel Sharon to swap his mailed club for an olive branch are by contrast real, accurately directed, and vastly significant. The trouble is, they are acts of appeasement rather than of resolution. This is serious, and if Washington is wrong (as I believe it is) about the Palestinian cause's real capacity for compromise, it will turn out to be a grave step towards the dissolution of the Israeli state—not by frontal military action but by demoralization, destabilization, and de-legitimization.

The Israeli state has many flaws that only a fool would deny. Terrorists, still not fully disowned and in some cases actually revered, were prominent in its establishment and then in its governing class. It has engaged in pre-emptive war and has driven people from their homes