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Paganism, Religion & Modernity

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by Milton Himmelfarb

JEW—MOST JEWS—ARE MODERN, ENLIGHTENED. JUDAISM ISN'T. BY JUDAISM I mean, for instance, the synagogue on Yom Kippur. Even of those of us who were in the synagogue on Yom Kippur, probably few are all that different from the ones who stayed away. How many really believed what we heard, read, and recited then? We're too modern. And because we're modern, we're apt to be dubious about religion. Not for scientific or philosophical reasons—most of us aren't philosophers or scientists. You and I have neither the intellect nor the training to choose between Bertrand Russell and Father D'Arcy when they debate about God. What do you and I know about the ontological proof, let alone the history and present status of the argument over it? Of course we know that science is supposed to have disproved God, or religion; but then what do you or I say to an Orthodox Jewish physicist or biologist?

What you and I give weight to and feel confident about is the so-called anthropological argument, the argument from human nature and history. We judge religion by its human effects, and we don't like what we think it has done to

men and women and to society. There are worse ways to judge.

What are those bad things that religion does? In antiquity Epicurus hated religion—the pagan religion he knew—for terrifying people and robbing them of peace of mind. The most complete extant statement of Epicureanism is the *De Rerum Natura* of the Roman Lucretius; and Professor Peter Gay, who admires the 18th-century Enlightenment, tells us that Lucretius was one of its two favorite classical authors. (The other was Cicero.) With ancient Epicureanism, the Enlightenment agrees that religion makes people unhappy and cruel. Lucretius lamented that *tantum religio potuit suadere malorum*, religion has been able to stir up so much evil; and the Enlightenment had its own confirming memories and experience. Additionally, the Enlightenment accused religion—Christianity, and the Judaism at its root—of despising reason, slandering human nature, and teaching a harmful sexual ethic.

Formally, at least, most of us haven't moved much beyond that bill of particulars. Yet for us the criticism has become less appropriate, less evidently a matter of good faith. What originated as criticism of religion can now be more validly directed against what is left of the Enlightenment in our late-20th-century hands. As with Epicurus's peace of mind argument, so with the later ones: the positions have been reversed. Only, after the reversals we still feel superior to religion.

For Epicurus, religion is bad because it robs us of peace of mind; if it gave us peace of mind, it would be good. For moderns, religion gives peace of mind, and therefore is childish. For moderns, religion stands in the way of a lucid maturity—our recognizing that the universe is indifferent or actually hostile to human needs, values, and yearnings. In Russell's "Free Man's Worship," the free man refuses to delude or beguile himself. Things are as they are, and they do not make for peace of mind. So much do we take all this for granted that the better class of religionists are embarrassed by Norman Vincent Peale and Joshua Loth Liebman—remember them?—and vie with the proudly despairing atheists in contempt for peace of mind.

Persecution, hate, division? To blame religion, now, is a feeble joke. We know what causes them: race, or nationality, or tribe, or caste, or class, or language, or ideology, or greed. Or simple bloody-mindedness.

The Enlightenment liked to say that Judaism invented intolerance, the mother of pious extirpations and burnings at the stake. At the same time, the Enlightenment greatly admired Rome, and the Latin authors more than the Greek. This wasn't only an inferior literary and intellectual taste. It was also political. The French Revolution had a cult of Roman republicanism.

The enlightened could blame the Book of Joshua for teaching the West to kill unbelievers: if not for those dreadful Jewish examples in Palestine three thousand years ago, Europe would have been spared later horrors. None chose to remember the republican Romans' coldly expedient genocide of their kin, the Samnites, carried out in the full light of history. None thought to ask why not one Roman writer had ever expressed doubt or regret about that genocide—or, for that matter, why no European humanist had ever expressed doubt or regret. (Only in our time do the Romans seem to have first been indicted for the Samnite genocide. And—ironically—only the Bible criticism that arose after the Enlightenment knows that Joshua isn't very historical.)

For the 18th-century enlightened, the jealous Jewish God had to be blameworthy and the Romans' latitudinarian paganism had to be praiseworthy. For us, to the evidence from ancient pagan history can be added all those fine modern things that have happened in our own century, after the decline of religion. That makes no difference. We continue to blame religion.

Religion is the enemy of reason—so the Enlightenment taught and so we still believe. Or rather, we take the trouble to believe it in the part of ourselves that still honors reason. In the greater part of ourselves, reason bores us. Two hundred years after the Enlightenment, its heirs celebrate their independence not from

rationalism—for the Enlightenment was as much empiricist as rationalist—but from rationality itself. The professors tell us that the campus rebels are the sweetest and most intelligent students of all, and maybe the French and German professors say that about their campus rebels. Of those heirs of the Enlightenment the implicit slogan is “logic, shmogic.” In the old days the enlightened couldn’t find language contemptuous enough for the religious *sacrificium intellectus*. Now the campus is as fertile in myth as any conventionally preliterate culture.

The distinction between reason and unreason is called artificial, and the very concept of insanity a gimmick for imprisoning spontaneity or vision. To some in the New Left, Rabbi Adler’s murderer was not deranged and sick, he is a political hero, fallen in the struggle against bourgeois hypocrisy. Liberalism is fascism, permissiveness is repression—so says an elite of the intelligent and educated in the West. (In Prague and Warsaw the intellectuals are not amused.) As a certain comedian used to say, “You can’t fool me, I’m too ignorant.” Compared with some of the elite, the ignorant seem positively addicted to reason. In the *Religious Situation*, 1968, Professor Huston Smith writes:

. . . as the weeks moved on . . . the students' true interests surfaced. . . . I cannot recall the exact progression of topics, but it went something like this: Beginning with Asian philosophy, it moved on to meditation, then yoga, then Zen, then Tibet, then successively to the *Bardo Thodol*, tantra, the kundalini, the chakras, the *I Ching*, karati and aikido, the yang-yin macrobiotic (brown rice) diet, Gurdjieff, Maher Baba, astrology, astral bodies, auras, UFO's, Tarot cards, parapsychology, witchcraft, and magic. And, underlying everything, of course, the psychedelic drugs. Nor were the students dallying with these subjects. They were *on* the drugs; they were eating brown rice; they were meditating hours on end; they were making their decisions by *I Ching* divination, which one student designated the most important discovery of his life; they were constructing complicated electronic experiments to prove that their thoughts, via psychokinesis, could affect matter directly.

And they weren't plebeians. Intellectually they were aristocrats with the highest average math scores in the land, Ivy League verbal scores, and two-to-three years of saturation in MIT science.

I don't doubt it for a minute. Those weren't low-IQ types, in that Washington march last year, who performed their Tibetan rites of exorcism against the Pentagon. And those others in the march, who wouldn't be so gauche as to snicker, weren't low-IQ types either. If only I could forget how Paul Massing's *Rehearsal for Destruction* describes a group of the intellectual forebears of Nazism in the generation before World War I: emancipated, educated or semi-educated food faddists, naturists, spiritualists, lovers of conspiracy theories, *et hoc genus omne*. Massing's subjects were on the Right, while Professor Smith's (and Norman Mailer's) are on the Left. I know that should reassure me, but somehow it doesn't.

For two hundred years liberals and radicals have agreed that traditional Christianity maligns human nature; and insofar as traditional Judaism has been thought of at all, it too has been judged guilty of lese humanity. Voltaire said that Pascal had taught men to hate themselves, whereas they ought to learn to love

themselves. A generation or so later, in Boston, one of the Eliots—they are still prominently associated with Unitarian-ism—said to a relative of hers, in sufficient explanation of her departure from the old, Calvinist ways, and above all the doctrine of total depravity: “Eliza, do you kneel down in church and call yourself a miserable sinner? Neither I nor any of my family will ever do that.” Yet today Voltaire’s disciples are respectful about Pascal-less the Pascal who honored God, of course, than the one who was unimpressed by man.

Actually, it isn’t clear how many descendants Voltaire has left. Sade probably has more. To say so may distress the proper members of the Enlightenment family, but Sade *is* in the genealogy. If it is true that the new young’s philosophy of life can be summarized in the question, “Why not?”, then Sade is the obvious ancestor. The God-is-dead theologians may not know it, but before Nietzsche it was Sade who declared (repeatedly, Professor Robert E. Taylor informs me), “God is dead, and anything goes”: *Dieu est mort, et tout est permis*. In the contemporary theater there is a serious play that takes Sade seriously. From Sade descend *Story of O* and Genet and others as well. Does their idea about humanity teach us to love ourselves? Even Calvinism is likelier to do that than our art is (or our science). Calvinism insists that a human being is a miserable sinner. At least this can be said for a miserable sinner, that he has a soul and was created in an image of some dignity.

In these days, if any thinker tells us good things about humanity, he’s probably religious: Rein-hold Niebuhr, say, who in the *Religious Situation* speaks of a “religious expression of trust in the meaning of human existence . . . recognizing and preserving the humanity of man.” The irreligious will take this as further evidence of religion’s childish shallowness—its unheroic evasion of the truth about man’s total nullity.

On no point is there greater agreement than that puritanism—or religion simply—teaches a wrong and harmful sexual ethic. Commonly the argument against puritanism is the same as against chastity, or continence. Professor Gay calls the

Enlightenment modern paganism, and a good bit of that paganism is rebellion against puritanism's twisting of our sexual nature.

It is a strong argument: Not only does puritan continence make us suffer, needlessly; not only does it impoverish our lives when they could be rich and fulfilled; but, as if that weren't enough, it also transforms an energy that could have rejoiced us into something sour and cruel and rancorous. Frustrated in the wholesome satisfaction of our needs, misled into feeling guilty about our natural desires, we do everything we can to make others equally wretched, enviously harrying men and women wiser and healthier than we. We make our society a prison, mirroring in the large the individual prison which each of us has allowed himself to be locked up in, or has actually built around himself. Delighting in death rather than life, we make misery and war the perverse expressions of the instincts we deny and suppress. Against such wicked folly the only useful counsel can be, "Make love, not war."

If any teaching of the intellectuals has become truly popular, it is this. One common theme of vicarage detective stories used to be the church-going voyeur, and another was the sanctimonious murderer. (We take it for granted that Jack the Ripper, who murdered prostitutes, must have been a victim of the puritan disease—indeed, take it for granted that prostitution itself is only a symptom of the puritan disease.) And just a year or two ago I was able to read a new detective story, set in Dutch Calvinist country, in which—I have forgotten the details—either the murderess or the writer of the poison-pen letters that touch off murder is a respectable, Godfearing woman, another victim of the puritan disease.

Professor Gay's *Party of Humanity* tells us:

Diderot[‘s] . . . *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, written in 1772, . . . may be taken as typical. Diderot seeks to integrate sexual life into the life of the community as well as the life of the individual—love-making is delightful in itself and socially useful. Diderot’s Tahitians are noble, but they are not savages. They are genuinely civilized men, and they are genuinely free. Tahitian society, as viewed by Bougainville and as reconstructed by Diderot, is a rational social order.

“In our presence, without shame, in the center of a throng of innocent Tahitians who danced and played the flute [the young Tahitian girl] accepted the caresses of the young men. . . . The notion of crime and the fear of disease have come among us only with your [sc, the Christians’] coming. I don’t know what this thing is that you call ‘religion,’ but I can only have a low opinion of it because it forbids you to partake of an innocent pleasure to which Nature, the sovereign mistress of us all, invites everybody.” . . .

Christianity makes people miserable and criminal: “People will no longer know what they ought and ought not to do. They will feel guilty when they are doing nothing wrong.”

Who that is modern, when he hears “Tahiti,” can fail to see in his mind’s eye an Edenic existence—sun, and breeze, and waves, and handsome, happy people whose life outside the skin is continuous with the life inside? To a modern what Diderot says is self-evident. I have read neither Bougainville’s *Voyage* nor Diderot’s *Supplément*, only what Professor Gay says about them. Whether it is a blessing or a curse I don’t know, but I can’t help being modern. Modernity is the station in history in which it has pleased God to set me. Tahiti can cast a spell on me, too.

Like the Maoris and Hawaiians, the Tahitians are Polynesians. I became a bit uneasy about this Bougainville-Diderot-Gay picture of genuinely free and civilized men, and their rational social order, and their life harmonious with reason and a benign nature, when I remembered that except for “aloha” and “luau,” the only Polynesian words I knew were “taboo” and “mana”—not quite the sort of words usually associated with freedom and reason. So I went to the encyclopedia (where I discovered I knew another freedom-and-reason Polynesian word, “tattoo”):

The Polynesians, because of their simple life and natural graces amid enchanting island surroundings, have long exercised a romantic appeal for the outside world. . . . The worship of the greater gods was in the hands of an organized priesthood, serving the ruling chiefs. Some of these gods required human sacrifices. . . . The chiefs, as descendants of the gods, possessed *mana*. . . . All the land of the island or district under [a chief's] jurisdiction was his. Over the people he had absolute power. . . . In some of the islands, human flesh was included [in the diet] at times.

If the Tahitians were like the Maoris, they too had “slaves . . . mainly prisoners of war [who] performed much of the menial labor.”

So Diderot was mistaken about the happy consequences of paganism. And though Bougainville may have misinformed him about the Polynesians, he knew about Rome. Knowing about Rome, could he really believe that paganism, or pagan sexuality, is delightful in itself and socially useful? The one thing no one can say about the Romans, at least after the Punic Wars, is that they subjected themselves to the rigors of anything resembling a Jewish or Christian ideal of chastity. It wasn't puritanism that made the Romans what they were.

Even today it isn't pleasant to read about the gladiators. Gladiatorial combat wasn't a product of Roman corruption or decadence. It was well-established long before the end of the republic, when Augustus could boast that he had entertained the people by providing them with ten thousand gladiators to fight in the amphitheaters: butchered to make a Roman holiday. The Emperor Commodus—the son of Marcus Aurelius no less—personally engaged in a thousand gladiatorial duels, and staged fights between cripples. (Other examples are even more sick-making.) Only when the Roman empire had been Christian for a hundred years could the gladiatorial shows be abolished.

As for Rome's treatment of slaves and her means of putting down the servile rebellions that that treatment incited—it doesn't bear thinking about.

Today the vanguard no longer even pretends to believe in the benignity of pagan sex. It isn't against pagan sex. Not at all. It just isn't much for benignity. Thus "theater of cruelty" is not an insult by hostile outsiders. This past summer, in the New York *Times* of all places, Elenore Lester, who likes what is going on in the advanced theater, could write the following:

Today's near-copulation is likely to give way, in the not-too-distant future, to the real thing, fulfilling a prediction Kenneth Tynan made about two years ago. And after actor-to-actor copulation, will it be actor-to-audience? . . . surely the next step must be programmed rape of the audience.

Of course, sexual relationships are not the only kind possible. . . . Violence is also interesting. . . . Polish drama theoretician Jan Kott observed that, because of all the shocks that are being given by the real world these days, there is a need for real shock in the theater. "We get that from sex and violence," he said. "It is possible to show lovemaking on the stage today, but," he added with a tinge of regret, "it is still impossible to murder." But of course, that was last year.

Someone should tell Mr. Kott about the Roman theater. In a recent Roman history he could read that "the Colosseum was the scene of theatrical performances in which the murders were not fictitious but real. Under Domitian the public was able to see plays in which one criminal plunged his right hand into a fire, and another prisoner was crucified. . . . In this period, too, Tertullian saw a performance of the *Death of Hercules*, in which the actor representing Hercules was actually burned to death as part of the show."

Only yesterday we thought of hippies as flower people. Their apparent gentleness could be taken to prove that if you satisfy the sexual instinct, you will be peaceful and mild. Today they, or their slightly younger brothers and sisters, aren't more frustrated sexually, they're only less gentle. Similarly with college students. Granted, we exaggerate the degree to which they are sexually freer than their

parents were when *they* were in college; but if there is a difference between the class of '70 and the class of '40, surely it is in the direction of greater freedom for the class of 70. Yet that isn't a notably unviolent class, and we don't find that its more violent students are also the more repressed sexually. Their violence is of speech and thought and appetite as well as of action.

Soft-boiled modern pagans have for some time been turning to Eastern pagan spirituality—music, meditation, texts, and so on. How long is it, as these things go, since the British in India had forcefully to suppress suttee, the burning-alive of widows? And in the summer of 1968 the Associated Press received the following dispatch from India:

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi has demanded an example be made of those responsible for the ritual slaying of a 12-year-old boy in Rajasthan state. A contractor is reported to have slashed the boy's neck to appease the gods at the laying of the foundation stone for an irrigation project. In a letter to the Chief Minister of the state, Mrs. Gandhi said that even those indirectly responsible for this "inhuman and barbarous act" should be punished.

The soft-boiled Western pagans may have only a partial understanding of Eastern paganism.

In our day, though, an intellectual or style-setting elite has to be hard-boiled. Its violence isn't comic book or television violence—that's for kids and the lower middle class—but something a little more thoroughgoing. There is the Sorbonne philosopher who is reported to have proclaimed, at the time of the French student uprising, that it wasn't enough to develop a philosophy of terror, it was necessary to replace philosophy by terror. There is the American literary review that helpfully ran a front-page diagram of a firebomb. (The Black Panthers' attraction for some whites is less clear-cut. The whites may only be personally kinky.) Like the

Enlightenment ancestors, the vanguard despises puritanism for its sexual repressions; but while the ancestors condemned puritanism for encouraging cruelty, our vanguard should be condemning puritanism for repressing it.

At this stage of the evolution of modern paganism, where you get your kicks isn't important, as long as you get them. Both bed and Colosseum are groovy. If the Colosseum—whips and chains—is groovier for you, O. K. Do your own thing. In fact, if we could only stop being hypocritical long enough to admit it, maybe the Colosseum is groovier for everybody. Isn't death the ultimate kick? (Someone else's death, that is; but maybe your own, too.) Anyway, nature unfortunately limits the frequency and duration of orgasm. But fortunately, nature doesn't limit the duration or frequency of orgastic cruelty. You can torture someone for as long as you want. In hardly any time at all you can hurt or kill as many as you want.

If one doesn't want to say “pornographic books,” for fear of using a censor's word, one says “sex-and-violence books.” And, not or. Sade wrote a few books in that genre himself.

It needn't be said here that “puritanism” is one of those slippery words. Normally we could call D. H. Lawrence a pagan, not a puritan. Dr. Leavis seems to see Lawrence as a puritan—because he is serious not frivolous, radical not graceful, intelligent not clever. Or we think puritanism hated sex. But historically puritanism is Protestant, and Protestantism had little use for celibacy: the monk Luther married a nun. (Queen Elizabeth wasn't so Protestant that she could quite get used to a married Archbishop of Canterbury.)

Puritan religion isn't only Protestant. So far, to disagree with the conventionally progressive Jewish view, I have been exaggerating the puritanism of the Jewish tradition. That point having been made, it remains to add that of course Judaism isn't Calvinist—or, for that matter, Thomist or Augustinian. Calvin taught total depravity; and until recently—only a few hundred years ago—all the major Catholic

and Protestant traditions agreed on the logically related doctrine of *paucitas salvandorum*. That is to say, the strong consensus of the Doctors of a religion that had come to replace Jewish law and vindictiveness by Christian freedom and love was that very few even of the faithful would be saved, the great mass being doomed to eternal punishment in hell. Judaism, so legal and vindictive, doesn't agree. I'm sure it wasn't Isaiah Berlin's intention to speak as a Jew when he denied historical inevitability, a modern secularist counterpart of predestination; but he expressed the central Jewish doctrine, or rather, a central Jewish feeling: often, Berlin said, the irresistible is only the unresisted. The Torah lesson of the Sabbath before Rosh Ha-shanah ends this way (Deuteronomy 30:19-20):

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, so that you may live, you and your progeny. Love the LORD your God, listen to His voice, and cleave to Him; for so you shall have life and length of days. . . .

Nothing predestined, inevitable, or irresistible about that.

So Judaism isn't Calvinist. But it is puritan, in that it likes chastity and doesn't like celibacy. In the historian Jacob Katz's study of the East European Jewish family as it was three hundred years ago, he has shown us Jewish law and thought concretely at work. The Rabbis may have been naive about other things, but they weren't naive about the sexual drive. They knew how strong it is. They didn't try to deny it or suppress it or divert it—they just tried to hallow it, in marriage. (Their term for marriage is *qiddushin*, "hallowing.") In the time and place Professor Katz examined, Jews married young. Nor were the rabbis Victorian, imagining that women—or good women—were sexless. Like any law, Jewish law deals with obligations and rights. East European Jews knew that Jewish law obliges a husband to give his wife sexual gratification, and entitles her to it.

Hume, and later Nietzsche, thought ill of Christianity for teaching men humility. Nietzsche was wrong in thinking that the source of that doctrine was Judaism. To be sure, man's humility is Jewish; but it is coupled, kept in permanent tension, with an equally Jewish belief in man's grandeur. In my part of the congregation, these last Days of Awe, the visiting rabbi preached a sermon based on the aphorism of a hasidic master: "Everyone should have two pockets. In the first he should keep a slip on which is written, 'I am but dust and ashes' [Genesis 27:18]. In the second he should keep a slip on which is written, 'For my sake was the world created' [Mish-nah Sanhedrin 4:5]."

In that verse from Genesis, Abraham is abasing himself before the Lord, though the abasement is somewhat *pro forma*: he is questioning the Lord's justice in dooming Sodom. The Mish-nah quotation comes toward the end of a long section about the warning that must be given to witnesses in a capital case: a man's life depends on what they say, together with the lives of all the descendants he could have:

. . . one man alone was created in the world, to teach you that if any destroys a single soul, Scripture regards him as if he has destroyed a whole world; but if any preserves a single soul, Scripture regards him as if he has preserved a whole world. . . . one man alone was created [from whom we are all descended], so that none should say to another, "My ancestor was greater than yours," . . . and in order to proclaim the greatness of the Holy One, blessed is He. For a man stamps many coins with one seal and they are all alike; but the King of the kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed is He, has stamped every man with the seal of the first man, yet none is like another. Therefore each must say, "For my sake was the world created." . . .

The major torah lesson on Yom Kippur is the 18th chapter of Leviticus. Some years ago, here, I suggested why it had been chosen for reading on Yom Kippur. Mostly it is about unchastity—incest, adultery, sodomy, and bestiality. Unchastity is forbidden not only as wrong in itself but also as an expression of paganism. Unchastity is the piety of paganism: the things that are “abominations” for Israel are the “statutes” and “abominable customs” that “they do in the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, and . . . in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you.” An equally abominable custom is the sacrifice of children: “You shall not give any of your children to be offered up to Molech. . . .” Bloodshed is likewise the piety of paganism.

Now I see that I stopped just short of understanding that for the Rabbis this chapter must be a concentrated scriptural statement of the practical negative theology of Judaism. It is a negative theology, because in one rabbinical definition Judaism is that which is not pagan: “[Mordecai] is called ‘the Jew’ because he repudiated idolatry, since everyone who repudiates idolatry is called a Jew” [Megillah 13a]. On “My statutes and my ordinances, by doing which a man shall live: I am the LORD” (Leviticus 18:5), the Midrash comments: “R. Jeremiah said: Why may one say that even a gentile, if he fulfills all the Torah, is like a High Priest? Because Scripture says, ‘by doing which a man shall live.’”

It is practical, because it is not a theologumenon, it is binding law, about life and death. “Having voted, they passed this law . . . : Concerning all the transgressions prohibited in the Torah, if a man is told, ‘Transgress and do not be killed,’ let him transgress and not be killed; except for idolatry, unchastity, and bloodshed” (Sanhedrin 74a). Since this is law—the most important law—normal legal reasoning applies. Is it legally permissible for a Jew, out of supererogatory piety or devotion, to allow himself to be killed rather than violate any other prohibition? Maimonides limits a Jew’s right to allow himself to be killed in such circumstances: By insisting on martyrdom rather than making the Muslim profession of faith, a Jew would be acting unlawfully, since Islam is completely monotheistic and aniconic. In this Maimonides agreed with the Midrash: “R. Ishmael says: Why may one say that if a man is told privately, ‘Worship idols and

do not be killed,' he should worship and not be killed? Because the Torah says, 'by doing which a man shall live'—not 'by doing which he shall die.' Should he also obey a public order to worship idols? The Torah says: 'You shall not profane My holy name, that I may be hallowed in the midst of the people of Israel; I am the LORD who sanctify you' (Leviticus 22:32). If you hallow My name, I too will hallow My name in you." Hallowing the Name is *qiddush ha-Shem*; which is also the term for martyrdom.

Paganism / idolatry, unchastity / licentiousness, and murder/bloodshed are for Judaism the unholy triad. (Respectively, they are [1] '*avodah zarah*, or '*avodat elilim*, or '*avodat gillulim*, or '*avodat kokhavim umazzalot*; [2] *gilluy arayot*, narrowly incest, literally "uncovering of nakednesses," as in Leviticus 18; and [3] *shefikhut / shefikhah damim*.) The three have an affinity for one another. In Genesis 6:13, "God said to Noah, 'I am determined to make an end to all flesh; for the earth is filled with violence [*hamas*; Jewish Publication Society, 1962: lawlessness]. . . ." On this the Midrash says: "R. Levi says: *Hamas* is idolatry, *hamas* is unchastity, *hamas* is bloodshed. . . ." Yoma 9b gives a striking conglutination of the cardinal sins: "Why was the First Temple destroyed? Because of three things: the idolatry, unchastity, and bloodshed in it. . . ." Examples from rabbinical literature could be multiplied. Maimonides says, in the *Guide of the Perplexed*: ". . . transgression of the commandments is also called uncleanness [*tame'timme*'];. This expression is used with regard to the mothers and roots of the commandments, namely [the prohibitions against] idolatry, unchastity, and bloodshed" (quoting Leviticus 20:3, Leviticus 18:24, and Numbers 35:34).

The Rabbis—founders of that in the Jewish tradition which is most distinctly and specifically Jewish, to this day—were not simply repeating what the Bible had told them, nor in their legislation were they carried away by some kind of exalted urge for martyrdom. They didn't need to read Ovid or Petronius or Tacitus or Juvenal to know how the pagans were about sex and about blood. They were contemporaries of Roman paganism, sensible men with eyes to see and ears to hear. Besides the law about martyrdom, they also enacted more prosaic laws, like this one: "Cattle may not be left in the inns of the [pagan] gentiles, since they are suspected of

bestiality; nor may a woman remain alone with them, since they are suspected of un-chastity; nor may a man remain alone with them, since they are suspected of shedding blood” (Mishnah ‘Avodah Zarah 2:1).

For the Rabbis paganism was idolatry, and they really couldn’t understand it. They knew, because the Bible told them, that in the olden times the Israelites had repeatedly backslid into idolatry, and they knew that the contemporary gentiles were idolators, but how people could take it seriously was a mystery to them. (Emil Fackenheim considers that problem, brought up to date, in his fine “Idolatry as a Modern Religious Possibility” in the *Religious Situation*.) It seemed reasonable to the Rabbis that paganism must be a pretext for something else: “R. Judah said, quoting Rav: Israel [in the days of the First Temple] knew very well that idolatry has no substance to it. They were idolators only to permit themselves public licentiousness” (Sanhe-drin 63b).

What about pluralism? I know I’m being anachronistic and reading a modern sensibility back into the Rabbis’ outlook. They insisted on a total Jewish repudiation of paganism, honored gentiles who abandoned paganism, and longed for the day when the Lord will be King over all the earth; but sometimes I like to think that maybe they also had a quiet weakness for pluralism. I can’t fault the Rabbis for being harsh to Esau and I’m glad my descent is from Jacob. But the price Jacob paid for his qualities was that he couldn’t at the same time have Esau’s qualities. Is there no room in God’s world for Jacob and Esau, both? I want to think there is, and to think the Rabbis thought so, too.

Certain virtues—if that word may be used here—primarily aesthetic, go with paganism: Balinese temple dances, for instance, and Polynesian graces. When in the *‘Alenu* I join the congregation in hoping for the time when the Lord has removed the idols from the earth and all flesh invokes His name, sometimes I

become a little anxious. What will the world be like when everyone's a Jew? Then I calm myself. That isn't likely to happen right away. Right now, Bali and Tahiti are rather more immediately vulnerable to jet airliners than to Judaism.

For a pluralist, that's too bad. As with liberty and equality, so with the unity of mankind and pluralism: in each set the two members don't get on easily with each other, but the intellectual difficulty of holding on to both is nothing compared with the moral difficulty of giving up either.

I suppose the Rabbis could have justified a measure of pluralism by appealing to some such verse as Micah 5: 4, which—for varied, sometimes contradictory reasons—has been popular with the Jews of modernity: “For let all the peoples walk each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God for ever and ever.” Not that Rabbis could have approved human sacrifice, then or now. For Jews and gentiles alike, the Rabbis wanted none of the practices of the bad old Israelite days, when, more or less like that Indian contractor in 1968, “Hiel the Bethelite [re]built Jericho. With Abiram his first-born he laid its foundations, and with his youngest son Segub he set up its gates” (I Kings 16: 34). But maybe the Rabbis weren't entirely unhappy that others were so foolish as to think paganism had some substance to it. Maybe they didn't object to pagans preserving unJewish virtues or graces in the world. That could be one meaning of the famous answer in 'Avodah Zarah (54b):

Philosophers asked the elders in Rome, “If your God dislikes paganism, why does He not abolish it?” They answered, “If the pagans worshipped something the world has no need of, He would abolish it; but they worship the sun and the moon and the stars and the planets. Shall He destroy the world because of fools? The world goes its wonted way, but the fools who have behaved unworthily will be held to account.”

