

A Dialogue on Religion, Reason and Politics

[The text is excerpted from the novel *In the Shadow of the Prodigy* (2007).¹ The narrator of the story, Michael Paradine, is a young historian with a marginal academic position and a commission to write a book about the history of the enterprises of the Overton family. The excerpt relates part of the first encounter between Michael and George Holbrook, a forester who turned his attention to religion and theology after an event that undermined his health for the rest of his life. The encounter takes place in the home of George's brother, Tim, and Tim's wife, Mary Jane. The story is set in 1994.]

After a long stubborn silence, George touched my arm: 'My question about religion did not embarrass you, did it?'

'No, not at all, it was a bit unexpected. I knew of course that you are Catholics. Tim told me that, at Hirsch's funeral.' I turned to look at him directly: 'I do have a question, if you don't mind.'

'Go ahead,' he responded eagerly.

'I understand your point about believing and knowing, and it is enlightening—I hadn't thought about religion in those terms. Still, believing or not believing a story is one thing but...'

'Rabbit stew!' Tim emerged from the kitchen carrying a heavy orange-red cooking pot. 'Mary Jane's specialty, so you know what to say of it!' He winked at me and then feigned deep mortification, pulling in his neck between his shoulders as if in anticipation of a hit to his head, when his wife, who was following close behind with a plate of potatoes, said, 'I heard that!' Doing my part in the familiar scene, I assured her, 'It smells delicious.' It was. 'It's wild rabbit,' Tim explained. 'There are plenty of them on the other side of the Wain.'

'Has the bridge been repaired?' I enquired, remembering what he had told me on the day of the funeral.

'Sure,' he answered, 'Ralph Jones knows better than to stall on an issue like that. That reminds me, George, we really should get moving on the purchase of that new truck crane.'

For a while they argued about cranes, horsepower and tractor repair, until Mary Jane stopped them with a reproachful 'Don't talk shop in front of our guest. Where are your manners?'

After that, the conversation drifted from topic to topic: the weather—Today was exceptional but in some places the road is still so soggy that we can't use our tractors without damaging it; wildlife in The Hollows—You should come back in the hunting season, Michael, you have no idea; the health of good old Martha, Jones's housekeeper—It's just a dip, she'll be back in no time; Armand Hirsch—Already making himself a name as a lawyer, that boy will go far; and inevitably, the local elections, which were only two days away.

'Ha, another Pray-for-Power Day! Tweedledee or Tweedledum, who cares,' George remarked dryly without a trace of humour.

'Is Ralph Jones or John Hirsch a candidate?'

'No, why do you think they would be?'

'Just curious, they seem to be really important men around here.'

'Really important men don't need elections to get their way. They prefer stooges for that part of the game.' George bristled with contempt. Tim expanded on that but I was not listening. A thought had come to me, and it immediately occupied my mind: Could it be that Jones or John Hirsch feared that I should reveal something about Alfred Hirsch that might embarrass them or one of their favourites in the run-up to the election? Had they brought in Sheldrake to keep me busy in London until after the elections? It was a possibility. People do the darnedest things for a privileged seat at the public trough and, as Sarah had intimated, John Hirsch was a skilful operator where the public trough was concerned. I turned my attention again to the two brothers, who were deep into a discussion about my mentor at Cunnir, Harry

¹ Details at <http://users.ugent.be/~frvandun/Shapro.htm> .

Walters. Apparently, George had serious reservations about the man. When Mary Jane began to clear the table, George brought me back to our earlier conversation: 'Now, Michael, you had a question concerning religious beliefs?'

'Well yes. Your insistence on the agnostic-versus-Gnostic angle, that was a bit of a surprise for me. I've always thought that the central question is about the existence of God.'

'Oh Michael,' Mary Jane exclaimed as she was about to go into the kitchen, 'that question was settled at this table... when... thirty years ago.' Tim let out a hearty laugh. 'That should have been in the papers!' George too was chuckling. 'It's not as dramatic as that. It's just that we think it's a silly question.'

'I don't understand,' I admitted over a timid giggle.

'What does it mean, "Does God exist?" To us it's like asking, "Is God part of Creation?" If that is what it means then God obviously does not exist.'

'So, you're saying the question is meaningless?'

'No, just silly,' Tim explained. 'God is sometimes defined as He who *is*, never as He who exists. Existence is a contingency; being is not.'

'Exists where, when?' George threw up his hands, palms up, ostentatiously looking up and down the room, as if those gestures by themselves demonstrated the silliness of the question. 'Surely one does not have a sensible notion of God if one wants to know His co-ordinates!'

I must have looked completely flustered. Tim poured some dark yellowish wine into a small glass. 'This goes with the dessert but you should try it now.' I tasted the wine. It had the sparkle of gold and was very sweet, very strong and without question the most delicious drink I had ever had. 'Sauternes,' he explained, holding up the bottle so that I could read the label; 'not the top—we can't afford that—but it comes close. We got a case, Mary Jane and I, when we went to France a couple of years ago for our thirtieth wedding anniversary. We befriended the owner of a chateau there and he let us have it for a very, very reasonable price.'

I took another sip, savouring the delicately viscous fluid as I held it on my tongue.

'It's really simple.' George resumed the conversation. He had waited patiently but now spoke with almost frightening intensity: 'God *is* outside time and space. That does not mean that He *exists* outside time and space, and it does not mean that He is an imaginary character. Being, existence, imagination: don't confuse them. Do not reduce being to existence, or existence to imagination. These reductions are the two most disastrous fallacies of modern Western philosophy.'

'Many things *are*, although they don't exist: numbers, for example,' Tim explained. 'You wouldn't say that there is no number two; yet, the number two does not exist anywhere in space or time. You can't smash it to pieces and it did not grow up and it will not decay; it did not "evolve" and it will not become extinct by natural selection. Moreover, some things are mere figments of the imagination. Don Quixote is one example, Mickey Mouse another. His image exists; in fact, Mickey *is* his image, that's all there is to it; he has no being apart from being imagined.'

'But God has?'

'Of course,' George said emphatically. 'He *is*, and He Himself is unimaginable, right? As for us, because of the conditions of existence, we are subject to forces, drives and motives. With our intellect and reason, we can nevertheless grasp some of the distinctions of being, such as true and false, logical and illogical, good and evil, just and unjust. We couldn't know even that we exist, if we didn't have this window on the realm of being.'

'God is, and we exist?'

'Correct, except that your soul—what you perhaps prefer to call your "self"—also partakes in the realm of being. It does not exist as a substance anywhere in space or time; no electron microscope will ever reveal it.' I must have given him a look of incomprehension, for George switched to a fatherly albeit impatient tone: 'Maybe you don't see that this is of the utmost *practical* importance, the foundation of ethics, I dare say. It is for us anyway.'

'Think of it this way, Michael,' Tim came in helpfully. 'As far as your body is concerned, the chap you were five minutes, five days, five weeks ago no longer exists. Your cells come and go; your brain creates and loses pathways all the time. Now, suppose you committed a crime

five years ago. Should I desist from holding you answerable and liable for that sin merely because the body that committed it no longer exists? Should I—could I even care about what you did five years ago if we had no personal being apart from our changeable bodily existence?’

‘It’s why the materialists have to deny the idea of personal identity: if they conceded that your identity as a person, your soul, is independent of the continuous material changes in your body then they might as well concede the immortality of the soul!’

‘But personal identity is a matter of memory, isn’t it? And memory is... well a material thing, no? I mean, computers too have memory.’

‘The same word but not necessarily the same thing. Anyway, memory is only half of it; the other half is anticipation. There you have the difference between those with a three-minute or three-career-step anticipation span and those who anticipate the final judgement. Believe me, there is a difference there.’ For a while George sat in silence, fidgeting with his glass, as if overcome by sadness. Then he muttered something that ended with the words ‘monomaniacal hatred of religion’, and returned to his argument about ethics: ‘Of course, we’re not God. Our personal being presupposes our physical existence, whereas God’s being presupposes no existence whatsoever. The same is true for Jesus Christ, even if he existed for a while as a man. That’s why we can’t live in imitation of God, and why we can and should live in imitation of Jesus Christ: accept the contingency of existence, but don’t forget the necessity of being. Stick to the truth and do good, and be prepared to suffer for it. Do you follow me?’

I picked up my glass and drank from it: ‘This is truly a good wine; I am going to drink it and I am prepared to suffer the consequences.’ It was a silly thing to say. Blushing, I grinned sheepishly at Tim, who exclaimed with a laugh: ‘That’s the spirit! Just make sure this particular spirit does not move you off the road when you drive back to Cunnir.’

George too appeared to take my remark with good humour but then proceeded with unabated seriousness: ‘Besides, the distinction between existence and being is of the utmost *logical* and theoretical importance. We believe that in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God. The Word, Michael! The Word, the logos, the ratio—call it the Truth, if you will—is outside time and place. It *is*, even if only tiny morsels of it actually exist as human thoughts or knowledge.’ I could assent to that and nodded eagerly. ‘Now, think!’ George went on, ‘You can imagine a language, such as mathematics, that has no means of expressing the concept of existence, but can you imagine a language without the concept of being?’

I could only hope that it was a rhetorical question, for I had no idea how I should answer it. I shook my head. ‘Please explain. I’m a historian and not used to handling abstract concepts.’

‘I’m a forester; but I don’t use that as an excuse.’ George wrapped his rebuke in a smile so benign that I did not mind its sting. ‘The truths of mathematics belong to the realm of being, not to the realm of existence and not to the realm of the imagination, although they apply to both of these. There’s no point in asking for their co-ordinates in space and time, is there? Would you say that they are mere imaginations?’

‘Certainly not!’

‘Now, consider logic. Every argument, no matter how significant or insignificant, would disintegrate instantly if there were no distinction between true and false, if it were indifferent whether a belief is true or false. Saying that there *is* no Truth is saying that everything anybody says is meaningless.’

‘I understand that,’ I said. Indeed, I had heard that argument before, although I could not recall when or where—probably in my student days, at university.

‘Fine, because if you take away the concept of Truth then all you have left is a chaotic mass of things going on inside and outside your brain with no meaningful connection between them. You’d be in total darkness. That’s obvious, right?’

That is philosophy, I thought. I remembered something our philosophy professor had told us, and quickly entered it into the discussion. ‘You mean to say that the Truth, what you call the Word or God, is a necessary fiction.’

Vigorously shaking his head, George shot back, ‘Nonsense, there’s no such thing. If it’s fiction, it’s not necessary; if it’s necessary, it’s not fiction.’

'Don't forget, Michael,' Tim came in soothingly, 'that George is talking about God as the necessary being, whose being can't logically be denied in any argument. He's not talking about necessary existence, which is an oxymoron anyway.'

'Thanks, brother, you're right, of course.' George turned to me again: 'The moment you grasp a truth, any truth, that's when your mind logically affirms the being of God.' Then, sotto voce, he summed up: 'God is the Word, the Truth, the Light of the World. Without God, there's only chaos; and truth and falsity, right and wrong, justice and injustice, are all irrelevant. Michael, you do understand that, don't you?'

The answer was on my face. George half-raised his arms and let them drop on the table with a bang. I wanted to avoid his stare but found myself unable to avert my eyes. From the kitchen came a faint incessant noise, almost like the fast drip of a tap on a thin plate. Tim broke the hush in the room: 'Relax, George, you're wearing down our guest—and he still hasn't got his dessert!'

My comfort was not his primary concern; he was worrying about his brother. However, I was slow to realize that and protested: 'Not at all, I find this most fascinating, although I must confess that I'm more confused than ever. I'd never thought I should hear a Catholic say that God does not exist. Surely, popular belief...'

'Ha!' George interrupted. 'Popular belief! Popular science! Popular history! Popular opinion—talk about false gods!'

'He was waiting for you to say that,' Tim said with a resigned grin. George was in his stride and enjoying it: 'And the media are their prophets! Don't make me laugh.'

I was out of my depth. If only I could entice George to descend to the level of the discussions about religion that I had often witnessed and participated in at university or the pub! I had never particularly enjoyed them, although they usually produced plenty of sniggers and guffaws: they resembled nothing so much as kicking a dead horse. But now, listening to the Holbrooks, I got the impression that my friends and I had been kicking a straw horse. Still, I did not want to go down without a fight.

'I've never understood that three-in-one conception of God,' I said, trying not to sound too defiant.

'I can imagine that,' George shot back with impish sarcasm. 'I've never understood that three-in-one conception of the state: the Legislative, the Judiciary, and the Executive—the father, the son, and the unholy spirit of Power; one state, a unity of three separate, independent make-believe persons.'

I thought it was an evasion and refused to take the bait. 'The *trias politica* is a sham.'

'Right! Just as modern philosophers confuse being and existence, just so modern lawyers confuse existence and fiction. They profess that the imagery of separated powers causes powers to be separated. And why should they not? Modern intellectuals, whose inflated egos would burst the moment they admitted any respect for God, dutifully revere legal fictions. Now consider this: Tim is a brother, a husband and a father—that's three-in-one—but he can't fully be any one of those persons, because of the constraints of existence. God, however, does not suffer the constraints of existence. He is in the fullest sense the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. In Him, the perspectives of being, existence and imagination are unified in harmony.'

'But what about the idea of a *personal* God itself?'

'The Word, the Truth... it makes sense only as something that's at once personal and common, some thing—the same thing—that two or more persons can discover independently. How can you justify your beliefs if all you can say is that they are your beliefs? How can you justify them if all you can say is that they are someone else's beliefs? How could you be a person, if you did not even try to justify your beliefs, if you did not care about justification?'

'I can't be a person if I don't believe in God?'

'By George, he's got it!' Tim exclaimed merrily.

'That's right, Michael. You wouldn't be a complete person if you couldn't grasp the concept of justification, which refers to pure judgement. Justification depends on your reasons for doing or saying something; it puts your judgement on the line. Revealing your motives, desires or impulses does not justify, although it may sometimes serve to excuse your actions. There is the

crisis of modern civilization for you: everybody is looking for excuses; it's considered very nearly an insult if one asks for a justification.'

'Slow down, George! Michael is a novice here.' Tim turned to me and explained: 'George's point is that you're not a complete person if you can't bring yourself to give accounts to an infallible judge, knowing that you shouldn't expect your rewards or punishments before the end of time. I mean a judge who listens to your reasons and is not fooled by your excuses. Morality is dead once people start believing that something is good only if it entitles them to an immediate reward, or bad only if it comes with the risk of immediate punishment.'

'Are you saying that a non-believer is not a person?'

'Of course not!' A look of exasperation crossed George's face. 'We're saying that any non-believer who cares about logic and truth must presuppose that there is this infallible judge. Otherwise, his intellect is an inert matrix, as impersonal and indifferent as my computer's operating system. He may deny that that judge exists somewhere in the expanses of time and space, but...'

'Why should that judge be God?'

'God by any other name would still be God. How many different *infallible* judges do you think there are? How many different numbers two? I'm talking about being and judgement, not about existence, certainly not about the existence of different human interpreters. One does not have to be infallible to know how fallible people are.'

'My father likes to joke that the English are so keen on human fallibility because it gives them a perfect excuse for taking nobody else seriously.'

'There's the slippery slope,' Tim said gravely. 'First you fail to take God seriously, then others, and finally yourself. Then, anything goes.'

George, however, would not be sidetracked: 'Your father may have a point there, but my point is this: merely persuading another does not justify anything, unless you know that the other is a better, wiser person than you are. If that were not true, justification would rhyme with conceit. Justification—doing justice—does not come that cheap. You can't make the meanest argument without implying that it *ought* to hold good in the judgement of an infallible judge. Otherwise, you might as well be talking through your hat. When you write about history, you seek the truth; you don't say to yourself "Let me see what I can get away with this time!"; do you?'

For the first time, I had a feeling that I understood what he was saying. It seemed logical enough, and it boiled down to this: I think; therefore, God is. And to get from the premise to the conclusion, I had to distinguish between being and existence, judgement and power, reasons and motives. But that was only the first step... I said: 'Okay, suppose that I accept your conclusion that God is the necessary personal being. I don't see how you can conclude that he is the creator of the universe and all the stuff in it.'

'I did not conclude that, did I? I don't *know* whether He did or did not physically create anything. Do you know? The Bible tells us that God created the universe, and the physicists tell us that it's incredibly improbable in itself, even more so if you consider the physical improbability of the conditions that make intelligent life possible. In short, from the scientific point of view, the physical universe is a miracle. According to Tim, who has read about these things, the alternative to believing that there is just this one universe is believing that there are innumerable many other but invisible universes—so many in fact that the existence of our universe no longer appears utterly improbable. Are you familiar with Ockam's razor?'

'The methodological principle that says that scientists should cut away all unnecessary entities in their efforts to explain the world?'

'Right. Now, what would you cut away: the one God, whose work is this, our visible universe, or an unimaginably large multitude of parallel universes, all of them in themselves as improbable and miraculous as ours, all of them with an at bottom random physical make-up distinct from ours, all of them beyond our powers of observation? Wouldn't you say that we, believing agnostics, are rather more rigorous in applying Ockam's razor than those who subscribe to the dogma that the universe is but a random draw from an undefined set of possible universes?'

I looked at Tim for help, but he had none to offer. ‘Do you believe in the Big Bang?’ he asked. ‘Do you know what caused it; how it could give rise to the wondrously improbable universe that we observe? Does science tell you where or when its causes were—or does it accept that its causes are outside the scope of time and space, and therefore have being even if they lack existence?’

When I kept silent, George continued: ‘Anyway, my conclusions were not about physics but about how all of our arguments ethically and logically rest on the necessary being of the infallible judge. Try to argue that God is not; if you're serious, you'll find that, even as you deny His being, you are appealing to an infallible judge—to God.’

I picked up my glass but it was empty. Tim hastened to refill it. ‘Now be careful,’ he warned me, ‘that's heady stuff.’

‘It sure is,’ I agreed, looking directly at his brother.

‘Yea, that too,’ Tim conceded.

‘We're Christians,’ George continued, ‘we believe in the Judgement of God, not in the benevolence of the Lord of Tricks and Treats, the Invisible Superman, the Big Nanny in the sky, the Heavenly Westminster. Do you know what really makes me angry? The whining of the bloke who claims that he lost his faith because lightning struck his house and killed his children, and he simply can't understand how the Almighty could let *that* happen.’

‘One of our neighbours in London says that she lost her faith when she began to suffer from insomnia and God did not answer her prayers for sleep. She thought it was the least he could do.’

‘For such people it is as if the power of the Word were some kind of magic rather than reason or logic, as if it were the power to deliver the final blow rather than the final judgement. Might is a matter of existence, judgement is the essence.’

‘Isn't love the Christian essence?’

‘No.’ George was adamant. ‘The essence of Christian love is justice, which is making good judgement prevail.’

‘Love is no excuse for injustice,’ Tim said. ‘It is “Love the sinner; hate the sin”, not “Love the sinner; let injustice reign.” Christian love ties in with veneration of judgement and being, not with submission to prejudice or strong emotions. If it were different, we shouldn't insist on prayer and confession, both of which serve to control the passions by focussing the mind on valid reasons, opening it up to being judged objectively.’

‘That's right. You can pray for fortitude, understanding and forgiveness. Praying for favours is as unchristian as it gets. “Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz...”’

‘I rather liked that song. A pity the girl who sang it didn't pray for some common sense herself.’

‘Yea, a pity...’

I had no idea what they were talking about. ‘And where does that leave the Church?’ I was desperate to score a point and the Church seemed an easy enough target.

‘The Church is a means, a method, a way. Granted, it's far from perfect and there may be other ways, although I haven't seen any that's demonstrably better. Try teaching essential truths to men who are not in the habit of thinking things through to their last consequences. It's not easy. You're a teacher, aren't you?’ I shook my head. ‘No? Anyway, even Jesus had to resort to parables. The Church too must attempt to present essential truths in ways that penetrate the minds of people with no time or inclination to pay attention to them. It's a risky business. There's always the danger that the form of the presentation obfuscates the substance of the message. Explain the relations of being with analogies drawn from existence and, before long, people walk away thinking that “being” is just another word for existence. Use the metaphor of physical power—force, weight—to distinguish between good and bad arguments and they conclude that might makes right. Tell them the lamb will pacify the lion and they believe that it must have sharper teeth and longer claws.’

Tim added: ‘Point to the truths discovered by scientists and people assume that whatever an academic white-coat tells them is true. Write down something important on official stationery and they believe the stationery is what makes it important.’

‘The Church pays dearly for that educational predicament. To prepare children for the truth, she uses stories and easy analogies. Sadly, most people, including some of the clergy, never get beyond the stories and the analogies. Is that good?’

‘No,’ Tim answered his brother's rhetorical question. ‘It's bad because with them faith risks becoming a blind superstition, a secular ideology of power in all but name—as cruel and barbaric as secular ideologies tend to be. Without the notion of an infallible judge who dispenses his rewards and punishments beyond the scope of time and space, reasons are reduced to motives, truth and justice to mere opinions, and judgements to mere prejudices.’

‘And that, Michael, is what now passes for the scientific view of man. Look at the so-called social sciences and economics. They can't deal with moral choice and would rather deny its reality than admit their own limitations. So these savants tell us we don't make moral choices; we just glide along on the roller coaster of our “given” preference curves, as if we're all functionaries working to meet the targets set for them by some inaccessible master—as if we're brutes, intelligent only in our brutishness. Right, Tim?’

‘Exactly! You don't argue with brutes, no matter how intelligent they are; you try to subdue and manipulate them: sticks and carrots, “incentives”. Look at economics: crude behaviourist psychology dressed up in cheap mathematics—replace “stimulus” with “incentive” and add a few differential equations and that's it: nineteen-thirties' technocratic messianism revamped for yuppies. Not too long ago I heard an economist declaim, “Philosophy is a branch of economics because economics is the science of incentives and everything is a question of incentives.” I'm not making this up. Where do they find such people?’

‘Universities have been turned into instruments of social change, Tim. They have a big, big stake in advertising themselves as power tools. They no longer seek to understand the world but serve its masters. Money over mind, you know.’

‘Economics once was an aspiring science but now it's a profession. Whatever the ruling ideology, the economists have a matching concept of efficiency at the ready. Depending on where the wind blows, they invent categories of costs and benefits and redraw the boundaries between internal and external effects to make any policy look good, or bad. They don't care about truth; they are in the business of selling policy illusions, techniques of manipulation, promises of power and control, and they sell to the manipulators, the power-hungry, the control freaks, the obsessive regulators.’

‘It's why most of them are such devoted materialists. Matter, the stuff of existence, they can manipulate; being, reason, they can't manipulate. That's why they hate religion and metaphysics, and indeed philosophy itself.’

‘It is so predictable,’ Tim shrugged. ‘Teach children and students that human beings are just animals and they want to be wardens in the human zoo, human-animal trainers—and they would sooner die than see the irony of what they are doing.’

‘Yes, but you know how it is with teaching such ideology-concealed-as-science,’ George retorted with a sudden broad smile on his face. ‘It only works for fifty percent of the pupils, while twenty percent are either too clever or too thickheaded to absorb it and the rest simply pay no attention. There's hope yet.’

‘Are heaven and hell educational metaphors?’ I asked to bring them back to our subject.

‘Well, they belong to the realm of being, not existence. When you're dead, you're dead. You can't correct your mistakes after death. As you once lived, so you shall be for all eternity. If that isn't enough to keep you on the right path, something has gone wrong with your education, don't you agree?’

‘The Immaculate Conception?’ Surely, I thought, this should cause some embarrassment, just enough to allow me to save face. George gave me an angry look and squinted his eyes in disdain. My question had nothing to do with their argument. I felt ashamed but George replied before I could mitigate the effect of my impulsive error.

‘Ah yes, of course! How can conception be immaculate? Does not everybody know that conception is just failed contraception? Seriously, how could Mary have been the mother of the Word Incarnate, if she'd been tainted by original sin?’

‘Many people like to make fun of the Immaculate Conception.’ Tim spoke with unusual passion. ‘They think we fail to observe the laws of physical existence. Well, we don’t. *They* fail to observe the laws of being. Beliefs fit into a logical pattern. That’s true for the Immaculate Conception. It’s also true for the transubstantiation doctrine. As Catholics, we believe that the body and the blood of Jesus Christ are actually present when mass is said. “Ridiculous superstition!” our detractors exclaim. Yet, they, or at any rate most of them, believe that a vote in Parliament transforms the opinion of a handful of MPs into the will of the nation. It does not, but if you truly want to be a citizen then that’s what you *have* to believe. If you want to enjoy Shakespeare’s tragedies, you don’t constantly jump up from your seat to shout at the actors, “He’s not really dead! He’s backstage having tea!” For our detractors, the Holy Mass is fair game, but the social rites in which they themselves participate are as “holy” to them as the Mass is to us.’

‘You’re not a materialist, are you, Michael?’

‘Of course, he’s not,’ Tim said with sweet mockery. ‘He’d have lost patience with us by now if he were.’

‘I do not feel comfortable with materialism,’ I admitted with grateful relief, for I had been close to revealing my ignorance by asking about the Immaculate Conception, which apparently referred to Mary’s saintliness, when I had the virgin birth of Jesus in mind; and George, who—I was sure of it—had noticed my mistake, had not dwelled on it. ‘Still, you can’t get around the fact of evolution.’

‘You should learn to give some precision to your words, Michael. We have no problem with the science of evolution, but there’s a difference between the science of evolution and the pseudo-religion of evolutionism. What possesses these evolutionists? Whatever they can’t explain in detail they presume to explain with a sweeping reference to evolution. They talk endlessly about unspecified random variations and clusters of low-probability events—what people used to call miracles—and then suddenly go ballistic the moment *we* mention a few miracles. They concoct a myriad stories about how giraffes might have got long necks and long legs, and then they accuse *us* of mythomania. They constantly seek refuge behind arcane theoretical distinctions but will not make the effort to distinguish between naïve creationism and the theological concept of creation.’

I should have known that George would be prepared for my remark. Moreover, I was inclined to share his sentiment: a colleague of mine at the Institute, a sociologist, used the lingo of evolutionism to ridicule the discipline of us historians. The next time he would do that, I should throw some Georgism at him.

‘But why should there be only one blessed virgin and only one incarnation? Surely, your god has the power to incarnate his word as often as he likes.’

‘You haven’t been listening carefully enough.’ George’s anger had abated and he spoke again in a fatherly tone. ‘God is the Word, not a puppeteer. Judgement, not power; remember? Truth and logic, not physics. The Incarnation and the Resurrection were decisive arguments, not interventions in a power struggle. Jesus didn’t smite the devil, did he? He confused him, just as he confused the scribes and the Pharisees. They didn’t fear his physical power but his Truth. Indeed, his Truth lives on, even though they overpowered and crucified him. God and Christ speak to our reason. Reason versus power...’

‘It is reason versus faith, isn’t it?’

‘If you believe that, you have no understanding at all of the Catholic faith.’

‘Besides,’ Tim argued, ‘what good would it do if Jesus appeared regularly all over the globe? Those who believe in one incarnation would fight those who believe in another and after a while the believers in one incarnation would fall out and start fighting each other. Don’t tell me that it has not happened before. It’s what human beings do—because of their free will, their physical existence with its modicum of power and their imperfect judgement.’

‘Free will and the responsibility that goes with it, that’s what it’s all about, isn’t it? It’s what being created in the image of God means. Adam and Eve were not thrown out of the Garden because they disobeyed. Which just and loving parent would do that to his children? God send them into the world because they’d reached the age of discernment and were ready to make

their own decisions; when He noticed they'd "become like one of us". Then it was no longer just, even for God, to hold them under His domestic rule. He accordingly gave them their freedom and told them about the responsibility that it entails.'

With a sorrowful voice, Tim added: 'But freedom is a burden. Many people hate the responsibility that goes with it, and that is why they want to deny free will. Determinism of any kind, most despicably the adoration of the powers that be, is the ideology of cowards, the ideology of the devil—no justifications, only excuses.'

George took over again: 'We can live by the Word or repudiate it. Unfortunately, most men, by far, prefer the immediate rewards of power to the blessings of good judgement. But that's human psychology, not a refutation of the Word. Rather than the truth, which is difficult, people seek company—conformism to the group norm is the cheapest way to avoid having to face the truth—because there's power in groups and organised power in organised groups. Mind you, the onslaught on free will has only just begun; the market for excuses, preferably "scientific" excuses, is still growing.'

'But does not free will rule out that God is omniscient?'

'Why should it? An attentive mother frequently knows what her child will do, without causing it to do it. That God knows what you will do does not mean that He makes you do it, and it does not mean that you had no choice. Mind you, for us, God is the infallible judge. Nothing in our faith depends on His being an infallible predictor, a bookmaker's wet dream. You don't think that God's commitment to free will is just posturing, do you? He gave us our freedom. He *is* our freedom. And that freedom was reconfirmed when Jesus, our redeemer, died on the cross, when he demonstrated that our way of being, our human existence, does not impede salvation. If you don't want to be free, that's your problem; have a lobotomy.'

'Birth control, contraceptives? Surely, the pope has no business in other people's bedrooms.' Why am I asking this, I thought as I was speaking. It was another desultory question and again George did not like it. He sighed and after a scornful look around the room retorted:

'Infidelity and promiscuity are okay, provided they are sterile? Is that what you're going to teach your children? This is about families, not sex, okay? The Church is not blind to the consequences of the widespread availability of contraceptives, which don't discriminate between marital and extra-marital sex. She's not blind to the consequences of separating marriage and rearing children. Read the Social Affairs section in your daily paper if you don't know what I'm talking about. Unfortunately, the intelligentsia decided that condoms and chemistry eliminate the need for moral restraint—and they had business and the medical profession on their side: there's an awful lot of money to be made from selling condoms and pills. Nowadays, it's medicine and therapy first and morality last or not at all, isn't it? Why educate a troublesome child if you can have it labelled, stuffed with sedatives, and taken care of by the therapists? It's the great discovery of this century: the fundamental cause of all our problems is that there are not enough professionals to deal with the symptoms.'

'Isn't it ironic, Michael,' Tim added, 'that you now hear the same people railing against "oppressive" capitalism and hailing the multi-billion pound sex and porn industry as the institutional symbol of "personal liberation"?''

'No sense of proportion: that is their problem,' George interjected. 'They go berserk if a farmer whips a cow on the way to the slaughterhouse, but they think subsidies for abortion clinics are a human right.'

'One crooked businessman is enough to make them clamour for the imposition of crippling regulation on an entire sector, but they blithely ignore the evidence of the havoc they wreak among the less sophisticated classes with their paeans to sex. Read the statistics, for God's sake. But then they don't care—not if it disturbs their cosy sybaritism.'

'By the way,' George remarked, 'these very same people have projected their own obsession with sex onto their caricature of Christian morality. Don't fall into their trap. The sin that troubles us most is pride—or hubris as you probably prefer to call it, which is the lust for power and eminence. The devil tempted Christ by offering him all the kingdoms of the world; he did not tempt him with an offer of free sterile sex. We may assume that he knew what he

was doing. Don't blame us if our political age has turned pride and its accoutrements, including sexual licentiousness, from sins into virtues.'

'Well said, George. We shan't be welcome among the sophisticates until we embrace their topsy-turvy morality of pride: "Whatever we do is virtuous because we do it." With God out of the way, what else can they say?'

I did not want to argue that the law of unintended consequences did not apply to the politics of sex, and I had no clear grasp of pride and humility as admirable or regrettable characteristics: 'But the Church stands in the way of the advance of medical science, doesn't she?'

'On some occasions, yes, she does, and for a good reason. Our being depends on our existence, on matter, cells, molecules and atoms, all of which can be manipulated. Medicine is advancing into territory where its manipulations may soon lead to the creation of synthetic humans, made to be tools of, for and by their creators. Consider the consequences: "*We* want our offspring to have the perfect constitution for a career in professional tennis; therefore, it shall have that constitution." Imagine yourself a kid like that! Are you looking forward to people paying royalties to the corporation that holds the copyright to their genetic makeup? Do you believe that we need not worry about those consequences and possible abuses because some government agency is going to enforce "safeguards"? Are you looking forward to a nation of people with "Approved by the Government" stamped on their birth certificates? How much power do you want the politicians to have?'

I wanted to protest that the intentions of medical science are honourable but already knew what sneering retort that would invite: The road to hell is paved with good intentions. I changed the subject again: 'Isn't it dogma that the pope is infallible?'

'You do like to jump around, Michael,' George said, his face showing fatigue as well as frustration and disappointment. '*We know* that popes are fallible men. What we have agreed to is this: the pope has final authority in questions of the faith that no appeal to empirical evidence can resolve, because they are not about existence but about being. The pope's answer to such questions is our answer, by convention. Why? Because we trust that men elected to the Holy See are, as a rule, not only true believers but also men of above-average virtue and integrity and intelligence. There's a lot of thought behind our dogmas.'

'Look around you, Michael. The dogma of infallibility is accepted in *every* polity. In this country, Parliament is supposed to be sovereign, to have final authority—to be infallible in precisely the sense in which we hold the pope to be infallible. Its edicts are supposed to be legally binding on all of us—dogma for all of us.'

'But there is a difference,' George replied to his brother. 'The pope's authority is restricted to just those questions that, among believers, can't be resolved otherwise. The bunch in Westminster assumes it has authority wherever it claims authority.'

Tim grinned: 'And voters don't as a rule trust their politicians to be of superior virtue or intelligence, do they? Perhaps they trust the bureaucracy behind the politicians, but only to the extent that it remains invisible to them.'

'People love magic,' George said truculently. 'They like to believe that they are in the Land of Oz, that behind the curtain there is this magical machine—the bureaucracy—that will make their dreams come true, if only they elect the right magician to push the buttons. Politics is the adults' belief in magic and fairies. Don't confuse the spectacles of politics with faith.'

'But surely, that's what most people expect of God, that he should fulfil their wishes.'

'Only people too dull to understand what Jesus meant when he said, "My kingdom is not of this world" and "I came into the world to give testimony to the truth." They pray for power, not for good judgement.'

'Besides,' Tim added gleefully, 'God does not run a campaign saying, "Give me your vote and I will give you what you want."'

'Exactly!' his brother exclaimed. 'He would promise to give them what they deserve—and *that* promise, I assure you, would cost him the election anytime.'

'Maybe I did confuse faith and politics.'

‘Nowadays everything is corrupted by politics. If politics can corrupt the Church, as it has often done, then it can corrupt any human undertaking. Mind my words, it will get worse before it gets better. The worship of power is not yet at an end.’

‘But my point was that the pope's infallibility is a recent dogma. How can you reconcile the Church's claim to eternal truth with changing dogmas?’

‘Oh really, Michael. The Church, as a human undertaking, is committed to *seek* the eternal truth; it does not *possess* it. Now don't tell this to people who want to be “in” or “cool” or whatever the word is, but this searching, which comes to life in praying, makes it “the only thing that frees a man from the degrading slavery of being a child of his age”—as our inimitable Chesterton put it. Besides, consider this: occasionally, very rarely in fact, the Church promulgates something as dogma that wasn't so promulgated before, and then the Church bashers can't contain their hilarity. Contrast this with their attitude towards the House of Commons and its *chronic* diarrhoea of dogmas—dogmas it intends to enforce by means of armed police and the most advanced information technology! That causes no mirth among them, only sanctimonious Hallelujahs for democracy. Should we be impressed with the self-proclaimed enlightenment of that lot? They represent progress? Is the perfection of the Police State your idea of progress?’

‘You have to admit George's point,’ Tim chimed in. ‘Nowadays we have the dogmas of political correctness everywhere, and they are still multiplying like frenzied rabbits. You don't want to be treated as a pariah? Then don't question anything that our benighted chattering classes hold dear. For them, infantile elves that they are, their opinion is the touchstone of Truth.’

‘A friend of mine calls them the A.P., the Abstract People. They just repeat one another's words.’

‘They do, Michael, they do.’ Tim chuckled appreciatively. ‘Compared to today's politically correct speech codes, the dietary prescriptions of the Old Testament are like nothing.’

George said, ‘Every criticism that can justifiably be made of the Church applies a hundredfold to any other organization. Isn't it ironic that the Church bashers, when they criticize the Church, can only point to human failings, human abuses? Yet, in the end, they don't want to get rid of the human failings. On the contrary, they want to ban God, get rid of the standards of judgement that permit us to recognize those failings for what they are. That's what it's all about, isn't it? “God is dead; therefore, Man is perfect; I'm a man; therefore, don't you dare to criticize me.”’

Surely, George is overreaching himself here, I thought. ‘I don't know anybody who believes that man is perfect.’

‘Oh really, Michael. The point is that those people claim that man falls short of human perfection *as they imagine it to be*, as if imperfect man had a perfect imagination. They are the ideologues, the utopians; they say to their fellow men, “Let me re-create you according to *my* imagination.” Don't confuse imagination and being, wishful thinking and objective judgement, ideology and religion.’

‘I have a book upstairs,’ Tim said, ‘written by a chap named Ludwig von Mises. Do you know of him?’

‘No. Is he a German?’

‘I have no idea; the book is in English. Anyway, it's about economics, although unlike any other economics book I've seen, and it has a section on religion, in which he says that in our time the most powerful theocratic parties are opposed to Christianity. He's right: theocracy is incompatible with free will, which is a central theme of the Bible. But *all* political parties are theocratic. Show me one that would say “No” to having an absolute majority and being in a position to impose its will on the rest of us. They all think of themselves as having the right to re-make the world in their own image.’

‘It's why they exist: to play Almighty God,’ George said disdainfully. ‘They forget that God gave us instructions on how to live peacefully together without toeing any party line. He specifically told us not to adore or serve any god but *Him*, the God of freedom, who delivered

us from slavery. The Rule of God *is* the law of freedom. If you believe the rule of any party is like that, look again.'

At that point, Mary Jane, carrying a tray with four glass bowls filled with a creamy pudding, emerged again from the kitchen. George looked up at her but continued to speak while she put the bowls on the table: 'People are drawn to extremes. They are so full of themselves, or else they think they are nothing. The Church is there to remind them of what they are: not the final word, not God, but nevertheless in the image of God; not the final judge but subject to a final judgement—not just caught up in the contingencies of existence but also in the necessities of essence. Tell me if there is a more important truth.'

'Right now, I say it's important that you shut up, George,' Mary Jane reproved him. 'I'm not going to watch this Sabayon go flaccid while you keep hectoring our guest.'