

# CHAPTER 3

## Gullibility in Religion

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Religion has proven to be a fertile field for the expression of gullible behavior, both in the portrayal of gullibility in religious characters, and in the unquestioning acceptance by followers of supernatural notions. In this chapter, a number of topics related to religious gullibility are explored. These include both conventional forms of religious expression (the story of Samson, Satan, belief in miracles) and less conventional forms (Spiritualism, apocalyptic sects, Christian Science). Although anti-Semitism could be treated as a form of political gullibility, it is included in this chapter because it is so often justified on religious grounds.

### SAMSON AND OTHER BIBLE STORIES

The Bible, as a moral teaching tool, contains many stories in which the trust of unsuspecting individuals is violated by those who use deception and dishonest manipulation.<sup>1</sup> With a few exceptions, such as Samson, the emphasis is on the motives and actions of the deceiver, many of whom are major Biblical figures, and not much is written about those who are deceived. The bulk of the Bible's deception stories are found in the Old Testament, particularly in the *Book of Genesis*, which predates the Ten Commandments and the other behavior prohibitions that are laid down in the Pentateuch. In fact, Alan M. Dershowitz (2000) argued, in *The Genesis of Justice*, that the Ten

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<sup>1</sup>All Biblical quotes are taken from the *Oxford Family Edition*, New Revised Standard Version, 1989.

Commandments, and indeed much of Western law, can be seen as attempts to erect barriers against the kinds of acts that are routine in *Genesis*.

Following is a partial list of incidents that involve exploitation of unsuspecting gulls in *Genesis*:

1. Lot escapes from doomed Sodom with his wife and two daughters, but his wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt. The two (unnamed) daughters, desiring to keep their father's lineage alive, get Lot drunk and seduce him. Lot wakes up with no memory of his having been raped, and the daughters become pregnant.
2. God, speaking through an angel, tricked Abraham into agreeing to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. At the last second, Abraham is told "never mind."
3. Jacob tricks his older twin brother Esau into giving up his rights as first-born son in return for a bowl of lentils; later, Jacob deceives his blind and ailing father Isaac into giving his blessing to him rather than Esau.
4. Lavan tells Jacob that he will have to work 7 years before he can marry his younger daughter Rachel, but he tricks Jacob into marrying the older daughter Lea. Jacob then has to work another 7 years before he can take Rachel as his second wife.
5. Shekhem, the Hamorite, who later asks for Dina's hand in marriage, rapes Dina, the daughter of Jacob and Lea. Jacob's sons (Dina's brothers) respond that they are agreeable, but only if Shekhem and all of his male relatives become circumcised, so that they can enter into an alliance together. While the Hamorites are in a weakened state following the surgery, they are slaughtered in an act of mass revenge.
6. Judah has three sons, Er, Onan and Shela. Er, the first-born, is married to Tamar. Er dies and Judah orders Onan to have sex with Tamar (in line with the "Leverite duty") in order that Er's inheritance rights may be preserved. Onan, whose own interests are better served if the order is defied, "spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother's wife" (resulting in use of the term "onanism" to refer to masturbation, when it actually should be used to refer to *coitus interruptus*). Tamar, despairing of the situation, disguises herself as a prostitute and seduces her father-in-law, and becomes pregnant. She protects herself against punishment by producing Judah's ring (given as an IOU for later payment) at what Dershowitz describes as the first judicial proceeding in the Bible
7. Joseph is sold into bondage by his jealous brothers, who tell their father, Jacob, that a lion ate him. Joseph is then falsely accused by the wife of his

master of attempting to rape her, in retaliation for spurning her advances. Joseph becomes a prisoner, where his talents as a dream interpreter cause him to become a high advisor to the Pharaoh. During a famine, Joseph's brothers come to beg for food and (without revealing his identity) Joseph sends them on their way with food and a supply of silver and gold, including a silver cup. He later sends the soldiers after them and has them arrested for stealing the valuable objects. Joseph's brothers are terrified and fear for their lives. Joseph then reveals his identity and tells them it was just a joke. Jacob is sent for and has a happy reunion with the son he thought was dead.

A prominent gullibility tale, and one of the few in the Old Testament that pays much attention to the victim, is the story of Samson and Delilah (*Judges*, 16). Samson was a fearsome Israelite warrior who had killed many Philistines. When Samson falls in love with Delilah, "the Lords of the Philistines came to her and said to her, 'Coax him and find out what makes his strength so great, and how we may bind him in order to subdue him; and we will each give you eleven hundred pieces of silver.'" Delilah asks Samson, "Please tell me what makes your strength so great, and how you could be bound, so that one could subdue you?" Samson falsely tells Delilah, "if they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings that are not dried out, then I shall become weak, and be like anyone else." The lords of the Philistines bring Delilah seven fresh bowstrings that had not dried out, "and she bound him with them. While men were lying in wait in an inner chamber, she said to him 'The Philistines are upon you, Samson!'"

Samson, of course, snapped the bowstrings and prevailed. This scenario was repeated twice more, with Samson telling two more lies ("bind me with new ropes that have not been used," and "weave the seven locks of my hair with the web and make it tight with the pin"), with the same results. Delilah comes to Samson a fourth time and asks "how can you say 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me?" Finally, "after she had nagged him with her words day after day, and pestered him [so that] he was tired to death," Samson told her the true secret of his strength, namely that he has never had a haircut. This time, the Philistines were successful in capturing Samson and gouging out his eyes, after which he gets his revenge (with the help of some grown-back hair and divine intervention) by pulling down the pillars of the Philistine temple, killing himself and 3,000 Philistines in the process.

My first reaction after reading the Samson and Delilah story was one of amazement at Samson's stupidity. Samson may indeed have been the Biblical prototype for the "dumb jock." I could understand Samson spilling the beans

if Delilah had used some guile, but she was pretty direct, saying, in effect, “Tell me what it would take to overpower and capture you.” True, he showed some coyness in giving her phony information, not just once but three times (with an obvious betrayal by Delilah following each disclosure). One wonders why Samson continued to keep Delilah around after the first betrayal, let alone after three. Then on the fourth occasion, Samson gives Delilah the key to his own destruction, after she uses an obvious “if you really loved me . . .” ploy and because he was getting tired of her nagging. In chapter 9, I discuss how exhaustion contributes to gullibility (as in the giving of confessions to military or police interrogators who make deliberate use of sleep deprivation). Samson is thus not the only notable person who sacrificed his long-term wellbeing in order to get a good night’s sleep.

Undoubtedly, the main moral of the Samson story, like much else in the Bible, is “keep it in your pants if you know what is good for you.” It may also, however, be read as a cautionary tale about the risks of extreme gullibility. The most famous example of gullibility in the Bible, and perhaps in world literature, was triggered not by a human but by the serpent, who tricked Adam and Eve into eating from the forbidden tree, an act that got them expelled from the Garden of Eden and that allegedly doomed the rest of us to being mortal. The serpent “was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made” and Eve—gullible and unworldly—was no match for him. The serpent assured her that God had not meant it when he threatened death as the punishment for eating from the forbidden tree. Furthermore, the serpent promised Eve that eating from the tree would make her and her husband a co-equal of God’s. Eve fell for this trick and talked Adam into going along with her. The serpent turned out to be correct in assuring Eve that God’s death threat was a bluff, but she undoubtedly came to regret her moment of weakness, as many bad things were inflicted on her and her husband, and succeeding generations, as a result.

This story is in many ways a prototype of the “gullible moment,” as emphasized repeatedly throughout this book. That is, gullibility often occurs in a complex and demanding micro-context, where various cognitive, emotional, and other challenges come together. Eve is not the only one who would make a poor choice when placed in such situation, given the pressures and inducements used and her own experiential and cognitive limitations.

## **BELIEF IN GOD AND SUPERNATURAL PHENOMENA**

In his book *A Devil’s Chaplain*, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (2003), explores the role of gullibility in mainstream religious belief. In a

chapter titled “Viruses of the Mind,” Dawkins alluded to “the programmed-in gullibility of a child, so useful for learning language and traditional wisdom, and so easily subverted by nuns, Moonies and their ilk” (p. 135). For Dawkins, gullibility is a quality that has important survival value for the species, as unquestioning acceptance of “memes” (cultural units for transmitting information) keeps children from being exposed to danger, such as from hot stoves or passing cars. The basic gullibility of humans continues into adulthood, albeit somewhat abated (Dawkins did not explain the abatement mechanism), and accounts for the susceptibility of many adults to supernatural beliefs and dubious religious doctrines.

Dawkins considered supernatural beliefs to be “mind viruses,” that is unworthy and untrue memes masquerading as legitimate ones. Just as biological and computer viruses worm their way into organisms and computers by masquerading as normal and safe micro-organisms and computer programs, so too mind viruses worm their way into the mind by their similarity to legitimate memes and by the built-in gullibility of humans who have been programmed to accept memes passed on by authority figures such as parents and religious leaders. Richard Brodie (1996) further explores these ideas in *Virus of the Mind*.

A personality quality that Dawkins (2003) sees as important for the ability to resist toxic memes (and, thus, to be skeptical about religion) is “any impulse to solve mysteries” (p. 138). He used as example the Catholic notion of transubstantiation, which comes into play when one takes communion. Dawkins said that “it is easy and nonmysterious to believe that in some symbolic or metaphorical sense the Eucharistic wine turns into the blood of Christ” (p. 138), but the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation demands more, namely a belief that the wine literally turns into Christ’s blood, despite the “accident” of it still looking like wine, through the “Mystery of the Transubstantiation.” For Dawkins, calling this a mystery makes it easier for Catholics—conditioned by a “belief in infallible authority”—to accept it as a miracle that does not have to be questioned further. This is because he sees Catholics having “mind[s] well prepared by background infection” (p. 139) to react to mysteries not with questioning but with awe.

A personality quality that Dawkins sees as critical to escaping the clutches of religious ideas is a willingness to stand up to authority. Dawkins noted that it is very rare for a person to adopt a religion other than the one followed by his parents, and said that when that happens it is typically because “[one] has been exposed to a particularly potent infective agent” (p. 143) rather than through one’s independent seeking and questioning. Dawkins illustrated the authoritarian nature of traditional religions by referring to a conversation he had with a London rabbi who was given the job of figuring out whether it

was acceptable for observant Jews to use cough lozenges made with menthol imported from China. The rabbi figured that the menthol was probably kosher, but needed to put someone on a plane to China just to make certain. When Dawkins asked him what was the point of such nonsense, the rabbi responded by saying that there was no point other than to have something to be obedient to. “It is very easy not to murder people,” said the rabbi. “But if He [meaning God] tells me not to have a cup of coffee with milk in it with my mincemeat and peas at lunchtime, that is a test. The only reason I am doing it is because I have been told to so do. It is doing something difficult” (p. 140).

For Dawkins, religious gullibility is not only an illustration of, but may be a precursor to, a more global form of gullibility. As he said, if you can believe “something as daft as the transubstantiation [then] you can believe anything, and (witness the story of Doubting Thomas) these people are trained to see that as a virtue” (p. 141). In other words, training children to accept nonsensical religious notions may predispose them to accept all kinds of other nonsense with a similar blind trust.

A considerably less hostile treatment of the role of gullibility in conventional religious belief is contained in a book by Michael Shermer (2001) titled *How We Believe*. Although a prominent skeptic, as well as an atheist, Shermer’s position is that one can be a skeptic toward irrational beliefs, including official religious doctrines, and still believe in God (in fact, as many as one-third of the members of Shermer’s Skeptics Society, and an even larger percentage of scientists, claim to hold religious beliefs). This is because for most people belief in God is a matter of faith, that is, an emotion-driven stance, and for Shermer that is acceptable. Where he draws the line, however, is when one begins to use rational arguments to justify such a stance, by pointing to various supernatural and miraculous phenomena as evidence. Then, Shermer’s skeptical juices begin to flow.

For Shermer, the explanation for why people believe in God is that “humans are pattern-seeking animals. Our brains are hard-wired to seek and find patterns, whether the pattern is real or not” (p. 61). He cited Bart Kosko’s (1993) book *Fuzzy Thinking*, to suggest that belief in God is analogous to what we do when we look at an optical illusion, such as the Kanizsa-square illusion, in which the mind fills in a square where all that is really on the page are four Pac-men turned at right angles. For Kosko, “God glimpses, or the feeling of God recognition, may be just a ‘filling in’ or déjà-vu type anomaly of our neural nets” (cited in Shermer, 2001, p. 62). Shermer noted that in the Kanizsa illusion, “there is no square. . . . The square is in our mind. There appears to be Something There, when in actual fact there is nothing there. As pattern-seeking animals it is virtually impossible for us *not* to see the pattern. The same may be true for God. For most of us, it is very difficult not to see

a pattern of God when looking at the false boundaries and bright interiors of the universe” (p. 63). An alternative explanation of religion, based on transferring to “God” the young child’s initial quasi-religious worship of his parents, was provided in a developmental study of magical thinking by Jean Piaget (1926/1969) discussed in chapter 1.

Shermer posited a “Belief Engine” to explain why most people (90% of Americans, the highest of any Western population) profess a belief in God, but also a belief in magic and various supernatural phenomena, such as an ability to talk to the dead. The best modern treatment of the connection between religion and belief in magic is contained in a book titled *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition*, by Stuart A. Vyse (1997). Magic is integral to religion, because the very concept of a personal God responding to prayer is magical, because many religious practices (e.g., sprinkling of holy water, the transubstantiation of the communion wine, the healing miracles attributed to saints) do not conform to natural laws and processes, and because in some religions priests are believed to have magical (e.g., shamanistic) powers.

Vyse sees belief in magic as a variant of superstitious thinking, which is the notion that performing or not performing certain acts can affect certain outcomes that are not logically connected to the act in question. Superstitions are fairly universal and are mechanisms for anxiety management rather than signs of mental illness. Engaging in a superstitious ritual does not in itself imply belief in magic. There are people, however, who engage in superstitious ritual and who do see a causative connection to some outcome. Then we are in the realm of magical (and gullible) thinking. An illustration can be found in the famous Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, who believed there was no such thing as a coincidence. One day he was psychoanalyzing a woman who told him of a dream in which she was given a golden scarab. Just then Jung looked up and saw a scarabaeid beetle, the closest thing to a golden scarab that one could find in Switzerland. It was banging against the window pane, trying to get into the darkened room, contrary to its usual practice of going toward the light. Jung was convinced that the woman’s telling of her dream is what brought this unusual event about. This tendency to see the working of magic, rather than coincidence, in unusual events is fairly universal and explains not only Jung’s belief in UFOs, alchemy and other supernatural phenomena but explains why so many people believe in God, prayer, and miracles.

## **SATAN AS A MANIPULATOR OF THE GULLIBLE**

The various Bible stories involving the devil, which many commentators consider a later manifestation of the serpent, all involve a variation on the

theme of an evil trickster who tries to prey on the gullibility of others. A Massachusetts Bay Colony law of 1647, termed the “Old Deluder Satan Act” (Cremin, 1970), mandated establishment of grammar schools and universal instruction in reading and writing, in order to foil attempts by the devil to take advantage of gullible individuals who are unable to read scripture. It is interesting to discover that public education in North America began not (as generally believed) to prepare young people for work or other aspects of adult life, but rather to make them less gullible and vulnerable to exploitation.

Nongullibility in dealing with the devil is a quality attributed to Christ, as reflected in the following exchange in Matthew, 4: “Then Jesus was led up by the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’” Jesus answered “One does not live by bread alone.” Then the devil dares Jesus to jump off the roof of the temple, to see if he will be saved by angels, and Jesus answered: “it is written, ‘do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Finally, the devil tries to bribe Jesus by offering vast tracts of land if he “will fall down and worship me.” Jesus tells the devil, in no uncertain terms, to get lost.

The notion of Satan as a manipulative trickster who preys upon the gullible and weak is still alive and well in some religious circles, especially among Fundamentalist preachers such as the late Reverend Jerry Falwell, who warned constantly of the lures of “Satan the Great Deceiver.” As detailed in a book by Joan O’Grady (1989) titled *The Prince of Darkness: The Devil in History, Religion and the Human Psyche*, the idea of an evil super demon is a logical outgrowth of the notion of an omnipotent deity, in that one needs to take God off the hook as an explanation for evil deeds. In the earliest Jewish writings, Yahweh was responsible for all that happened in the world, good and bad, but contact with the Persian religion during the period of Jewish exile in Babylon brought about the introduction of the idea of Satan (a Hebrew word) as the adversary of God and man.

In the Book of *Job*, Satan is introduced as tempter, but is still seen as a subject of God and under his commands. This shift to a splitting off of Satan as an independent entity is seen by comparing an early book, *Samuel*, in which Samuel was tempted by God, to a later book, *Chronicles*, in which David was tempted by Satan. The story of how Satan was cast out of heaven by God appears in an Apocryphal book, *Enoch* (a book which had all but disappeared before it was rediscovered), written in 200 BCE, shortly before the Christian era. Enoch, which tells the story of the exile of the fallen Prince of Darkness, never became

an official part of Jewish scripture, but apparently had important influence over the much fuller development of the devil concept in Christianity.

A host of names, such as Beelzebub (literally “Lord of the Flies”) in late Judaism and Lucifer, in Christianity and Islam, have been used to refer to this personification of evil in the world. The core motive underlying the fall of Satan (who is usually portrayed as having at one time been God’s favorite angel) is pride and self-love. The central mechanism used by Satan to tempt men into evil deeds is deception, specifically involving a false presentation by the devil of himself as good and as interested in the victim’s wellbeing (an early prototype for this use of deceptive flattery is the serpent in the Garden of Eden). According to O’Grady, it was Saint John of the Cross, in the 16th century CE, who most fully developed the notion of the Devil as one who tricks the worthy, by preying on their pride and self-complacency. For Saint John, and later Christian writers about the devil, the focus is really on the process by which one is deceived and tempted by others or oneself into behaving badly, a process that capitalizes on one’s own worst needs and self-deceptions. The idea of a personified devil as the tempter, while a useful metaphor, is secondary, and almost irrelevant, to the advice these writers give as to how to live a worthy and gullibility-free life.

As described in Elaine Pagels’ (1995) *The Origin of Satan*, and Peter Stanford’s (1996) *The Devil: A Biography*, the devil concept proved to have important political uses, and played an expanded role in Christian theology as a means to the end of social control and consolidation of power by religious and other leaders. Thus, there is a double edge to the role of gullibility and the devil, first in the gullibility of those who are led astray by evil thoughts or devil-like tempters, and second in the gullibility of those who are manipulated by leaders who use the devil concept to do in their enemies and achieve political or other ends. Thus, Pagels noted that in 90 CE, Clement (a successor to Peter as Bishop of Rome), believing that church opponents were in the process of caving in to his authority, “avoids associating them with Satan, as later leaders would do with more entrenched dissidents” (Pagels, 1995, p. 153).

The end to which the devil concept proved most useful in early Christianity was as a rationale for the suppression of various heresies, including many teachings that today would be considered quite tame. The most influential tome in this effort was *Against Heresies*, written around 180 CE by Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons. Heretics, according to Irenaeus, are those “‘who claim to be Christians . . . [but] use the name of Christ Jesus only as a kind of lure’, in order to teach doctrines inspired by Satan” (p. 155). According to Pagels, this document was used for succeeding centuries as a basis for Christian persecution of

other Christians. In one of the suppressed heretical documents, *The Testimony of Truth*, the anonymous disaffected author takes this notion even further: describing the majority of Christians as heretics and “gullible disciples, subject to seduction” (p. 158) by church authorities.

The two high (actually, low) points in the political use by the Roman church of the devil concept came in the medieval period, as reflected in the Crusades and the suppression of the Cathar heresy and, later, in the Inquisition and the witch hysteria. In the 16th century, Martin Luther—the founder of Protestant Christianity but conventional in his thoughts about the devil—took the concept to its logical extreme, labeling as agents of Satan the following: Jews, Roman Catholics, all who fought against landowners (Luther needed their support), and all Protestants who were not Lutherans (Pagels, 1995). Luther, plagued by constipation, even blamed his gastric problems on the devil.

## BELIEVERS IN END-OF-THE WORLD PREDICTIONS

Shortly after we moved to Colorado, in mid-1998, I struck up a conversation with our postman, “Tom.” I knew he was a member of a fundamentalist Christian church (he had tried to recruit me) and I was curious to learn about his beliefs. I asked Tom what he thought about the coming of the year 2000. He told me emphatically that the world was about to end. I asked him why he thought that and he told me that some very significant things were happening in the world that all pointed to that conclusion. Tom was particularly impressed by a story told by a member of his church who had emigrated to Colorado from Mexico. According to this person, a Mexican woman had recently given birth to a baby who came out of the womb with horns like the devil’s. Although a newborn, this baby spoke in perfect Spanish and said “the world is about to end.” Then the baby and its mother both abruptly died. What amazed me was Tom’s unquestioning belief in the story’s veracity, and his apparent lack of interest in asking questions such as “how did the parishioner come to learn of this story?” and “what evidence did she have that it actually happened?” To Tom, the truth of the story lay in its congruence with the tenets of his religious belief system and the fact that others in his church believed it.

An interesting aspect of the gullibility of believers in an imminent apocalypse is that it does not seem shaken by the failure of earlier predictions by the same cult leader. Social psychologist Leon Festinger and his colleagues explored this question in their book *When Prophecy Fails* (Festinger, Riecken, & Schacter, 1956). Their explanation made use of the notion of cognitive dissonance,

a theory initially developed by Festinger. Cognitive dissonance is a state of tension caused by the fact that an aspect of reality is in conflict with a strongly held idea or value. When this happens, according to the theory, one either abandons the belief or finds a way of reframing reality to fit with the belief. Although most of the research on the theory took place in the laboratory, the prophecy study was done in the field, using observational methods. The study was inspired by a publicized prophecy by a “Mrs Keech,” that on a certain date there would be a great flood. Mrs Keech was very interested in space ships and other occult phenomena, and she claimed that the message about the flood had come to her through automatic writing, done while in a trance state, from superior beings on a planet called Clarion.

The researchers managed to infiltrate Mrs Keech’s group (using deceptive methods that would today likely be considered unethical) and described what happened when the appointed day came and went without the predicted apocalyptic flood. Although a small number of members, whom the researchers considered among the least committed, did drop out of the group, the majority of the members had their beliefs actually strengthened by the failed prophecy. This was done by reframing the episode as a test, by interpreting various other events (such as a mysterious visit from five young men who the group decided were aliens in disguise) as a sign that something was still going on, by Mrs Keech continuing to get clarifying messages (such as that when the ship came for them, they would not be returning to Earth), and (the spin always put on failed apocalyptic prophecies) that the predicted catastrophe was averted by their own actions and beliefs.

The history of the Jehovah’s Witnesses shows how a fringe religious sect can survive, and flourish (today it has millions of members), even in the face of multiple failed apocalyptic prophecies. Barbara Grizzuth Harrison (1978) who, as a child was raised in a family of Jehovah’s Witnesses, gives a fascinating account of this phenomenon in her book *Visions of Glory: A History and a Memory of Jehovah’s Witnesses*. The founder and first president of *The Watchtower Bible* and Tract Society (the official name of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, later changed to *Zion’s Watch Tower Tract Society*) was Charles Taze Russell, born in Pittsburgh in 1852. A successful haberdasher, Russell became interested in his late teens in the teachings of the Second Adventists, who taught that Jesus would physically return and the world would end in 1873 or 1874. Russell felt that the methods used to make these predictions were unsound, and in 1873, at age 22, he published his own ideas, in a book titled *The Object and Manner of the Lord’s Return*. His basic idea was that Christ would come silently, not in visible form, and that his purpose was to bless, not destroy, the people on the earth. In 1877, Russell merged his Pittsburgh group with one in

Rochester, New York that held similar ideas, started calling himself “Pastor Russell,” and traveled around the United States giving sermons.

At age 26, in 1877, Russell published a book with N.H. Barbour (the leader of the Rochester group) titled *Three Worlds, and the Harvest of This World*, in which they laid out a highly intricate theory regarding the coming apocalypse. They wrote that 6,000 years of human existence had ended in 1872, and that the invisible Christ returned to earth in 1873. Beginning in 1874, a 40-year period began in which righteous ones would be “harvested.” At the end of this period, in October 1914, the world would end, but not before Russell and his followers would disappear, called away to be with their Lord in 1878. Of course, 1914 was the year that World War One began, but Russell was still around.

Although Russell had earlier written that the 1878 date could not be altered, he proceeded to periodically present new mathematical calculations, on the grounds that Biblical dates were hidden by God and the exact formula could not be known until God saw fit to reveal them. This formulation, which could explain away all “miscalculations,” was later buttressed by a change in the nature of the predicted event itself. In the new version, the prediction was changed from one in which believers were to be called away to one in which they were to enjoy everlasting life on earth, with the added wrinkle that they could die but later be called back to life. There were obvious advantages to this new prediction, as nothing happening could be taken as confirming evidence for the truth of the prediction, and the death of a follower could always be blamed on his or her lack of piety.

As with many cult founders, Russell was highly autocratic, and was accused of numerous sexual and financial improprieties. He was the target of many lawsuits, with his opponents always depicted by him as agents of Satan and his own persecution always used as evidence of his identification with Christ. Russell was associated with various financial scams, the most successful of which was to sell “miracle wheat” seeds, advertised in *The Watchtower*, for \$60 a bushel (at a time when regular wheat seeds sold for \$1 a bushel and produced twice as much yield) and then funnel the proceeds into a dummy corporation that he controlled.

Russell died in 1916, 2 years after his failed prediction that the earth would end in 1914. Although one might have expected the sect to fold, it owed its survival in large part to World War One. One reason was because many of its members were imprisoned due to their refusal to serve in the military, thus shifting the focus of sect members away from internal disputes and towards external persecution. More importantly, the conflict (which began in 1914) was interpreted as a sign that Jesus had begun his war with the Devil, but in

heaven rather than on earth. The fact that the earth survived was also interpreted (in line with the Cognitive Dissonance theory of Festinger and his colleagues) as a sign of God's benevolence. As quoted by Harrison (1978):

Had Jehovah's great warrior, the Lord Jesus, continued his assault against Satan and his angels after that first skirmish which dusted those rebels from heaven, . . . no flesh would have been saved. So, for the sake of God's own people, and to fulfill his purpose, Jehovah "cut short" those days of tribulation against the invisible rebel spirits by stopping his war for a period before . . . Armageddon. (p. 165)

Thus, what could have been seen as complete failure was used as the basis for an altered theology, one that emphasized a dual road to salvation: a few living saints would be called to heaven immediately after their deaths, whereas other (not yet worthy) followers would have the opportunity to live forever once the earth was cleansed and perfect.

This continual reframing of its belief system to explain away disconfirming reality explains, in part, the survival and growth of the Jehovah's Witnesses. It is also likely that the makeup of church members (many of them unsophisticated, some with marginal mental health) is a contributing factor. The rigid nature of the church's hierarchy, the convoluted dogma, and the movement's tarnished history would likely cause more sophisticated people to respond with great skepticism.

## **THE GULLIBILITY OF THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN MEDIUMS**

Spiritualism is an alternative religious movement that sprang into being in spring 1848, in the Hydesville, New York home occupied by a farmer, John Fox, along with wife and two teenage daughters, Katie and Margaret. For several nights, there were mysterious rapping and other strange sounds. One of the girls was able to induce the raps by snapping her fingers, thus suggesting that some conscious agent was responding. The girls developed a system for communicating with the presumed spirit, asking questions and then having it answer with one rap for "yes" and two raps for "no." Similar phenomena began to appear throughout upstate New York, and later throughout the region. A movement, termed Spiritualism, began to make converts throughout the world, and within 15 years after its humble beginnings, it was estimated that there were more than 11 million adherents in the United States alone. An excellent account of the origins of this movement, including the likely faking

by its originators, can be found in *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism* (Weisberg, 2004).

The appeal of Spiritualism lay in two factors:

1. It offered an alternative to establishment religion, and a means for individuals to communicate directly with God, at a time when reform of many institutions was in the air.
2. More importantly, it provided an opportunity for people to communicate with loved ones at a time (predating antibiotics and modern medicine) when life expectancy was short and child mortality was rampant.

For this reason, Spiritualism probably reached its zenith in the immediate aftermath of World War One in England, when a huge percentage of the young adult male population had died in the trenches of Europe. Another part of the appeal of Spiritualism is that it lent itself to entertaining theatrical acts, at a time before the invention of radio, motion pictures, and television. Many professional magicians found second careers as Spiritualists, whereas other magicians reproduced Spiritualist effects in their magic shows, and scientists and other magicians (most prominently Houdini) set out to expose the fraudulent nature of mediums and various Spiritualist phenomena.

One of the most ardent believers in Spiritualism was the English physician and author Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, who wrote several popular books in support of Spiritualism and was a star on the lecture circuit, where one of his main attractions was the showing of slides purporting to show faint images of ghosts and fairies in the background. Doyle, whose conversion to Spiritualism reportedly stemmed from a desire to communicate with his son who had been killed in World War One, was so committed a believer that even when mediums were exposed (or self-confessed) as frauds, his explanation was that they sometimes became tired and only resorted to fakery on those occasions. Even after the most famous of his fairy photos were shown to be fake (through evidence of double exposures and switched photographic plates), he continued to use them in his lectures, and in a book he wrote in defense of fairies.

There is a fascinating account of the friendship between Doyle and the great magician and escape artist Harry Houdini (the Wisconsin-reared son a Reform Jewish rabbi who had emigrated from Germany) in a book by Kenneth Silverman (1996) titled *Houdini !!!: The Career of Ebrich Weiss*. Although Houdini became interested in Spiritualism initially after the death of his mother, his intellectual honesty and deep understanding of conjuring tricks made him one of Spiritualism's leading opponents. Doyle was fascinated by Houdini

because he believed him to be a secret medium, whose amazing escapes from locked and submerged trunks and the like were due not to his physical and intellectual skills but to a supernatural ability to dematerialize and rematerialize himself. Doyle, who believed that Houdini was concerned that his popularity would wane if he admitted he was a medium, dismissed the fact that Houdini consistently and vehemently denied this explanation. Doyle used Houdini's denials as further evidence that he actually was a medium, for why else, reasoned Doyle, would Houdini be so adamant unless he wanted to divert people from knowing the truth.

For his part, Houdini thought that Doyle was one of the most gullible men he had ever met. For example, Houdini recounted the time that he accompanied Doyle and his wife in a taxi back to their hotel after a dinner at Houdini's home in upper Manhattan. Houdini entertained them with simple magic tricks, such as making a coin disappear. Doyle was dumb-struck and expressed great amazement.

To me, the most interesting thing about Spiritualism is the fact that many of its adherents—such as Doyle—were people of great education and accomplishment. One would like to think that intelligence provides some protection against nonsense of this sort, but obviously in many cases it does not. Cognitive psychologist, Ray Hyman (2002), provided an interesting example of this at a lecture I attended of the Rocky Mountain Skeptics (and that I understand will be included in a forthcoming book by Hyman on Nobel-caliber scholars who fall for crazy ideas). The example involves a late 19th-century professor, Johann Carl Friedrich Zoellner, a leading German scientist who is considered the father of astrophysics. One evening, Zoellner attended a demonstration put on by a visiting American spiritualist, Harry Slade. The demonstration consisted of a number of tricks—a rope untying itself, writing appearing on a slate, and so on—all of which Hyman, a magician in his younger years, was able to replicate in his lecture. Zoellner was so blown away that he converted to Spiritualism and wrote a book claiming the existence of a fourth dimension accessible only to people with supernatural talents.

Hyman (2002) devoted much thought to the question “Why are great scientists sometimes so stupid?” Part of his answer is that the stereotype of scientists as coldly rational and always analytical is a myth, and that the truly great scientists, such as Zoellner, are risk-takers and contrarian thinkers whose greatest insights often occur through intuitive flashes of insight. Unfortunately, such reliance on intuition and emotion can sometimes lead even the greatest of thinkers astray.

A puzzle about Doyle concerns how someone so dismissive of evidence (his response to any finding critical of Spiritualism was to ignore it because

“everyone knows it exists”) could have created so rational and scientifically oriented a fictional character as Sherlock Holmes. Some have suggested that Doyle hated Holmes for this reason, as reflected in an often expressed desire to kill him off. But Holmes lacked the one quality of a true scientist, which is a willingness to consider the possibility that he might be mistaken. His deductions were typically based on the flimsiest of evidence (appropriately seen as a kind of wizardry) and his intuitions were, magically, almost never proven wrong. If he were a real-life character, Sherlock Holmes would almost certainly have been as gullible as Doyle.

### GULLIBILITY IN ANTI-SEMITISM

Anti-Semitism is a religiously inspired quasi-political movement that exploits the gullibility of people who are quick to believe all sorts of negative things about Jews, particularly that their machinations are at the root of everything bad in the world. One modern twist on this theme is that the Nazi extermination of Jews didn't happen, was greatly exaggerated, and in any event was not ordered by Hitler. In this view, the story of the Holocaust was a lie orchestrated by the Jewish establishment.

According to cognitive psychologist Keith Stanovitch (1999), people who are gullible enough to believe such nonsense are not necessarily lacking in intelligence (which Stanovitch viewed as the possession of cognitive schemas) as they are guilty of being “irrational” (i.e., unable to apply those schemas adequately to accord with reality). He gave the example of two Illinois teachers who were fired after they sent out letters to parents protesting the requirement that the curriculum include a unit on the Holocaust, an event that the teachers were convinced was a historical fiction. To Stanovitch, such irrationality/gullibility is fueled by what he terms an *intuition pump*. In other words, when people hold on to a powerful affective notion, such as that Jews are at the root of all evil, the only truth that matters to such individuals is the truth that resides inside their heads.

Anti-Jewish sentiment is an old phenomenon, going back to Biblical times, and in its early forms it was based primarily on the fact that Jews had different religious beliefs. It has played a central role in Christianity, primarily because of the importance given to the story of how the Jews, and Judas Iscariot (the only one of Jesus' disciples who bore the name of the Jews), betrayed Christ. This story, of how Christian leaders increasingly came to scapegoat Jews for the death of Christ, is explored in *Judas Iscariot and the Myth of Jewish Evil* (Maccoby, 1992).

The early view of Judas was that he was a fool, a gullible shmuck tricked by the Romans. A later shift to viewing him (and by extension, Jews) as evil was, according to Maccoby, an accommodation to the anti-Semitism that was already widespread in the Greco-Roman world. Maccoby wrote that “the incipient anti-Semitism found in Paul’s epistles developed into a full-blown indictment of the Jewish people as the rejecters, betrayers, and finally murderers of Jesus” (p. 27). After the disastrous Jewish war against Rome (which resulted in destruction of the Temple), the Pauline Church was careful to deny any Jewish connection, or any notion that Jesus was a rebel against Rome, and developed the idea that Christ was an opponent of the Jewish religion as opposed to someone whose main goal was to reform the Jewish religion from within.

In order to blacken the reputation of the Jews, and thus cement their position with the Romans, the post-Pauline leaders developed the notion that Judas, and by extension the Jews, were evil arch-sinners who brought divine retribution down on their heads for their skepticism in rejecting and betraying God’s son. In particular, Jews were portrayed as schemers who manipulated the Romans into killing Jesus and were responsible for all of the bad things that happened in the world.

The use of Jews as a Christian scapegoat was cemented in the Middle Ages (which began around 1,100 CE), and was best exemplified in the Passion Plays that depicted the life and death of Christ. Those plays began around 1,300 CE, and were enormously popular. In them, Biblical Jews were portrayed as evil moneylenders, when in reality most of them had been farmers. Again, contrary to historical reality, Jews were depicted carrying out all of the evil deeds against Jesus, including piercing his side with a lance. The negative portrayal of Jews in Passion Plays is still alive, as seen in the film *The Passion of the Christ*, produced by actor Mel Gibson.

The Pauline and medieval myth of Jews as evil conspirators has continued into the modern era and lies at the core of 19th- and 20th-century anti-Semitism, as described in a book by Robert S. Wistrich (1991), titled *Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred*. The book contains an especially good account of the 1890s “Dreyfus Affair,” in which the defeat of France by the Prussian army was blamed on espionage by Captain Alfred Dreyfus, the highest-ranking Jewish officer in the French Army. Although the evidence against Dreyfus was later determined to be a forgery, it took years for his name to be cleared, and the affair showed how deep-seated anti-Semitism was in France, a country in many ways tolerant of Jews.

The emotional hatred of many Christians against Jews made them likely to gullibly accept two notorious anti-Semitic rumors: the “blood libel,” which

began in the Middle Ages, but continued (in various guises) to the modern era, and the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, which was a 20th-century phenomenon. These two rumors were widely believed, especially by the unsophisticated masses, and were used as the basis for untold numbers of anti-Jewish riots and pogroms.

An account of the origins and influence of the blood libel can be found in *The Blood Libel Legend: A Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore* (Dundes, 1991). The basic form of the legend is the belief that Jews capture non-Jewish children, and then torture and kill them and use their blood in satanic rituals. The first known example of the blood libel took place in 1144, in Norwich, England, when the body of a Christian child named William was discovered. The rumor that developed around this death was that the Jews of Norwich had bought this boy for the purpose of crucifying him on Good Friday, and that his grave was discovered because of divine intervention intended to punish the Jews for their crime. In this story, the monks at a monastery were directed by the Lord to bury William as a holy martyr. A book was written by Thomas of Monmouth, purporting to detail both the crime against William (who became sainted) and the many miracles attributed to him.

The earliest accusation that Jews engaged in ritual murder was made in the second century BCE, in a story told by the historian Posidonius about a rumor that every 7 years the Jews captured a Greek, cut him up and ate parts of him, and swore an oath of hatred against Greeks. Such accusations were rare, however, until the Middle Ages. Following the story of William of Norwich, blood libel rumors began to crop up regularly in countries throughout Europe, and were used as a pretext for killing rampages against Jews, or anti-Jewish policies such as the mass expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492.

A modern equivalent of the blood libel, which has been used throughout the world as a justification for anti-Semitism is a pamphlet known as the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. A historical account of this notorious anti-Semitic tract is provided in *A Rumor About the Jews: Reflections on Antisemitism and the Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* (Bronner, 2000). The tract, which first appeared in 1903, consists of “the supposed minutes from twenty-four sessions of a congress held by representatives from the ‘twelve tribes of Israel’ and led by a Grand Rabbi, whose purpose was to plan the conquest of the world” (p. 1). It actually was a crude forgery, created by the Imperial Russian secret police, and used as a justification for blaming the Jews and the Freemasons (who supposedly were in cahoots with them) for the revolutionary political turmoil in Russia and the military weakness of the country after its defeat in the Russo-Japanese War.

Although the pamphlet was a ludicrous and obvious fake, it was exported around the world, was treated as serious by any number of political and intellectual leaders, and was, according to Bronner, made required reading by the Nazis. As described by Bronner, the document (along with the blood libel) was used to justify many notorious pogroms in Russia and other countries in eastern Europe. Reportedly, the Protocols can still be found in book stalls in Russia and various Muslim countries, among other places. It has even been serialized as a TV mini-series in Saudi Arabia, a country where Jewish travelers are refused entry.

Industrialist Henry Ford was a big fan of the Protocols. In 1920, he launched an anti-Semitic campaign in a newspaper he controlled, the Dearborn *Independent*, by authorizing a serialization, and later mass distribution, of the Protocols and a series of editorials on “the Jewish question” (a euphemism for “should Jews be allowed to be citizens?”). As detailed by Neil Baldwin (2001) in a book titled *Henry Ford and the Jews: The Mass Production of Hate*, Ford always believed that “history is more or less the bunk.” Believing that history was a series of unpublicized conspiracies, and because of his pre-existing anti-Semitism, Ford promoted the Protocols as a way of setting the historic record straight. Thus, in a bizarre twist, a conspiracy theory fueled by prejudice became the “real history.”

## CHRISTIAN SCIENCE AS A MAGNET FOR GULLIBLES

In addition to the many failed prophecies, one reason why the Jehovah’s Witnesses call on more than the normal amount of religious gullibility is because its members follow a highly dangerous prohibition against blood transfusions. This prohibition has caused many deaths to followers and to their minor children. Christian Science is another religious sect, also founded in the United States, where prohibition against modern medical practices plays an even more central role than is the case with the Jehovah’s Witnesses, where such a prohibition is limited mainly to blood transfusions (although some Witnesses have naïvely applied the prohibition to vaccinations because of a mistaken belief it involves a transfer of blood).

Mary Baker Eddy, who was born in New Hampshire in 1821, founded Christian Science, which last reported its membership numbers in the 1930s when the estimate was 500,000. The religion, and its charismatic founder, has been the subject of a number of books exploring the possibility that Mrs Eddy was a fraud and her followers highly gullible dupes. Among these were *The*

*Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy and the History of Christian Science*, co-authored by Willa Cather (Cather & Milmine, 1909/1993). Cather was fascinated by Eddy's neuroticism, and supposedly used her as the model for Mrs Cutler in her novel *My Antonia*.

A more in-depth treatment of Eddy is *The Healing Revelations of Mary Baker Eddy: The Rise and Fall of Christian Science*, by the mathematician and skeptic Martin Gardner (1993). Gardner provided evidence that predating her founding of Christian Science, Eddy engaged in a variety of spiritualist practices (which Eddy later denied) in which she communicated with the dead through such means as automatic writing and séances. The turning point in Eddy's life was her discovery of a quack doctor named Phineas Parkhurst Quimby. A clock repairman, Quimby developed an interest in mesmerism (a healing method based on a hypothesized electromagnetic field in the body termed *animal magnetism*) and a belief that he possessed the ability to detect illness with his mind. His key idea was that all illness was a result of wrong thinking, and that he could cure illness by teaching a patient to think correctly. In Quimby's view, all illness is in the mind and the cure for illness is to give up a belief that sickness and pain actually exist.

Quimby was a highly charismatic figure, with deeply hypnotic eyes, and it is likely that some of his "cures" were brought about in hysterical patients through the force of hypnotic suggestion. Eddy, a woman with little formal education, became a follower of Quimby and his ideas, after she went to his Portland, Maine office in 1862 (when she was 41) for treatment of what she called her "spinal inflammations," which had kept her for years in a state of bedridden invalidism. Achieving some relief, Eddy went to study with Quimby for several months in 1864 and later became a devoted disciple of his methods and theories.

Quimby died in 1866 at the age of 64, attended by a homeopathic doctor, and later that year Eddy was injured in a fall, which restored her to her former state of invalidism. Without Quimby to help her, Eddy said that she lay in bed leafing through the Bible and ran across Matthew 9:2, which told the story of Jesus healing a man with palsy. Eddy was inspired by this passage, which convinced her that Quimby's method was congruent with Christian beliefs, and she termed her synthesis "the Science of Divine Metaphysical Healing," later changed to Christian Science. Eddy later wrote that she cured herself using this new belief system, although Cather suggested that her recovery was due more to the effects of repeated doses of morphine. In fact, Eddy had periods of recurring illness for the rest of her life, and she became quite dependent on morphine to deal with the pain. However, because pain did not

exist for Eddy, she justified her use of morphine by claiming that it helped to combat her false belief in the pain.

Eddy claimed that there was no religious emphasis in Quimby's ideas, and that the Christian rationale for her movement came from her alone. In fact, Quimby was very religious and made many references to Christianity in his writings. Eddy came to downplay Quimby's contribution, and even claimed that he had been her disciple rather than the other way around. In fact, Quimby's ideas had influenced a movement called New Thought, and were filtered into a number of its books, such as Walter Evans' 1869 *Science and Health: The Mental Cure*, that antedate Eddy's books, likely influenced her, and anticipated all of the ideas published in 1875 in the first edition of her book, also titled *Science and Health*.

By all accounts, Eddy was a highly unstable woman, who for her entire life had anxiety attacks (as a child caused by fears of Satan) and needed to be rocked every night to sleep. Although she gave up mesmerism as a healing force, she continued to believe in it as a force for evil, and was convinced that her illnesses were brought on by her enemies who directed "malicious animal magnetism" (MAM) her way. She was attended by students and followers in her evolving church, and from time to time she directed her disciples to work in round-the-clock shifts in her home, using their own thoughts to create a barrier that would ward off the MAM that was aimed at her (modern day Christian Science has largely expunged mention of MAM from its writings, in an effort to erase evidence of its founder's paranoia and to avoid the destructive practice whereby church members used to accuse each other of MAM whenever they had a disagreement). Eddy constantly railed against her servants, accusing them of stealing and of acting under the influence of MAM. Eddy attributed the death of her last husband, clearly of a heart attack, as revealed in an autopsy, to MAM and to poisoning.

The tremendous growth of Christian Science in the 1890s provoked concern that what appeared to be a wacko cult was in danger of surpassing traditional Christianity in numbers of adherents. Among those who criticized Eddy in print was America's greatest satirist, and commentator on gullibility, Mark Twain (1907). Aside from being concerned about Eddy's empire building and cult following, Twain was offended by the third-rate quality of her writing. He was convinced that Eddy's major work, *Science and Health*, had been ghost-written, because it was somewhat less incoherent and ungrammatical than her letters and some of her articles. But Twain was unable to get his hands on the original 1875 edition of *Science and Health*, which to this day has been kept from examination by scholars.

To my mind, the great scandal of Christian Science is the willingness to endanger the lives of followers by discouraging them from seeking traditional medical treatment. A prominent example involved the great puppeteer Jim Henson, who sought medical attention for pneumonia only when he was literally on his death bed. Even in Eddy's lifetime, there were some high-profile deaths of church members. A notorious case involved Mrs Abby Corner, of West Medford, Massachusetts, who handled, without medical assistance, the birth of her daughter's child, using "metaphysical obstetrics," a technique taught by Eddy in her lectures. Both her daughter and grandchild died during the delivery, and Mrs Corner was arrested for manslaughter.

The lack of empirical validity for the effectiveness of Christian Science healing can be found in a number of studies. For example, it has been found that the death rate from cancer of church members is twice that for the general population, that the life expectancy of church members is significantly lower than for non-church members, and that nearly 20% of deaths of church members are preventable. So why do Christian Scientists, many of them well educated and affluent, continue to participate in a religion that endangers their lives and the lives of their loved ones?

One assumes that most practitioners believe that the practice does work, as reflected in the fact that they are still alive, and may have a somewhat lower incidence of minor illnesses. There is, in fact, some evidence that the immune system is influenced by the mind, although none that illness is an illusion. The ideas behind Christian Science have some superficial validity and it is, therefore, understandable that they would appeal to many people. Furthermore, one can always attribute a major failure, such as the death of a member, to the fact that she didn't pray hard enough and thus wasn't close enough to God. Such a "blame the victim" stance explains why people stay in snake-handling Christian sects, despite the many families that have been decimated by deaths from snake bites (Brown & McDonald, 2000).