Mixed Signals

On Being a Gothic Christian

James Rattue

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… 'Cause this feeling of forgiveness means much more to me
Than that paper on the wall that cost you all of ten bucks
If an ancient word, a heathen spell can salvage me
I will believe in miracles 'cause it would take a saint to set me free

And if my luck don't last too long
Or if my life gets worse
I'll be back for another song
A blessing or a curse
And I'll never ask for refunds
'Cause I know you're not to blame
Take more blood more hair more money
I'll do anything to claim

A little second hand faith
A line upon my palm that I can just erase
'Cause I need to believe in a hierarchic grace
I can do without a book I'll never read
Second hand faith is all I need

- Emilie Autumn, 'Second Hand Faith'

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The east end of the church of St Mary de Castro, Leicester, where I worshipped between 1991 and 1992 – 'Prayer Book Catholic' style

Introduction: Strange Bedfellows

Mr Taylor, the, er, tailor opposite my theological college, had handed me a couple of shirts and I was trying them on in the changing room. It was a few days before I was due to leave St Stephen's House, the Anglican vicar-factory just off the Cowley Road in east Oxford. I would then have a few weeks sorting out my new home in Weybridge where I would, barring last-minute divine intervention, begin work as curate at St James's Church at the start of July. The black shirt with its little slip-in bit of plastic forming the clerical collar looked ridiculous on me and it took a positive effort even to raise my eyes to the mirror. I bought a white clerical shirt too, telling myself it was because it looked smart and slightly unexpected, but I suspect the psychological explanation was that I was inwardly trying to deny to myself what was happening.

Only a few years before I had been very happily cataloguing objects, answering public enquiries and arranging exhibitions at Wycombe Museum in High Wycombe. Museums are a weird but rather wonderful world and I'd been very happy at Wycombe. I'd got to know a lot about the town and was pleased I could use my knowledge helping people who came to ask questions, giving talks, and devising ways to use our very limited display budget to tell our visitors about the interesting objects we looked after and the equally interesting historical landscape outside the building. My greatest triumph, and pleasure, was being allowed to research and write a new book on the history of the town and delivering a lecture about it which packed out the local municipal hall and then some.

I'd become a Christian a few years before, when I was living in Chatham. I was quite heavily involved in my parish church, a stratospherically Anglo-Catholic* establishment only a couple of hundred yards up the hill from my house, knew the vicar well and had had a number of rather inebriated dinners with him and his little household consisting of two lodgers and the girlfriend of one. After the Mass for Corpus Christi* one year, at which I was a server, the Blessed Sacrament was carried in procession around the church across a carpet of rose petals, and Benediction* was given amid so much incense you could barely see. Down in the vestry, Father Chris wiped his brow. 'Just what I like,' he said, 'nice little simple Bible service.'

There was a parallel but different movement going on in my life too. Having always been drawn to what we might sum up as 'morbid aesthetics', I was tiptoeing into the Goth culture having encountered it repeatedly for years and not recognising what it was, or its connection with the things I was interested in. In 1996 I'd joined the Gothic Society, and always looked forward to its bizarre and amusing magazine, *Udolpho*, dropping through the letterbox. Discovering, and being captivated by, the singer Diamanda Galás (reductively but not inaccurately labelled by a friend as 'that woman who screams'), I did something mad, and, in the Autumn of 1999, struck up a conversation about her with a Goth girl I'd seen in the town a couple of times (shopping with her mum, as it happened). She took me to a group which had begun meeting in various local pubs, and that was my entrée. I was 30, very late to start this kind of thing, but that's been my life all through.

Meanwhile, Fr Chris had worryingly suggested I should think about, at least *think* about, the vague possibility that I might be cut out for some larger role in the Church. I began going through the various stages the Church of England has, in its wisdom, devised for discerning vocations, not taking it very seriously but reasoning that I should at least let God have some say in the matter rather than simply ruling it out of hand. And at each stage I was passed on to the next, still with no clear desire on my own part to carry it through. Then people began saying strange things to me. One young woman I encountered at the local Goth group, within ten minutes of meeting me, was asking me whether I'd ever thought of 'going into the Church'. A friend-of-a-friend attending a concert, during a conversation about jobs, told me she was a palmist and that I had 'typical priest's hands', whatever they are. This weirdness is still the most impressive part of the whole process to me!

At St Stephen's House I still thought to myself that it might all come to nothing, even though I'd left my job and my home to come to that point. Equally, I carried on attending gatherings of the Oxford Goths and went to Intrusion, the local club, now and again. I was telling myself 'I can still run' as I left the college. In fact, part of me was insisting I could still run even as I was kneeling at the altar rail of Guildford Cathedral during the ordination service and His Grace the Lord Bishop was laying hands on the head of the person next to me. The thought was increasingly unconvincing by that stage.

Since then, people in both halves of my life, the Christian and the Gothic, have shown a degree of fascination about the other half and how I manage to combine the two. You can come up with a theory which does that neatly, the 'Jesus Was Gother Than You' position – pointing out the common symbolism of blood in Christianity and Gothic, the sense in both of marginalisation, the interest in death that links Gothic and Christian art. I've never liked neat theories very much. It just so happens that in this individual Gothic and Christianity are combined, and so clearly they can't be *too* far contradictory. But one changes as time goes on; trying to follow Jesus Christ demands change, as does life generally. In 1995 I was confirmed and converted (in that order), and in 1996 I subscribed to the Gothic Society; the two halves of my life have, I think rather fruitfully, thereafter developed together and informed each other. That's what this booklet is about. So let's begin.

1. The Cross and the … Cross

I bought this brooch at the Alternative Bring-and-Buy Sale from my friend Jaki, who makes jewellery, liking the motif of the spider superimposed on the cross. The quarterly Alt-B&B has become a fixed event in the London Gothic calendar; even if you don't buy anything you get to speak to people you haven't seen for ages.

Recently I read a book by a warm-hearted if sceptical priest who was into stories. We're all into 'stories' and 'narratives' at the moment, and prefer them to brutal things like 'facts'. This seems to be a consequence of the Postmodernist movement which got going in the late 1980s; the collapse of the grand narrative of Marxism opened the way for all our own little individual narratives which could prove nothing, only be offered with the validity that came from being our own experience. Anyway, this clergyman maintained nobody would be very interested in the *real* story of his how he became a Christian, which consisted of getting into the front carriage of a train at Raynes Park station and discovering he believed in God by the time he arrived at Waterloo. Instead he told a tale of his friend Josh, who he met on that train and fell into conversation with, and kept meeting all the time afterwards, gradually discovering what an astonishing person this Josh – Jesus – was. I can see his point, but I can't shake off my historian's conviction that there's a real story somewhere, and that you *need* the real story as well as the fairy tales.

In the Old Days you were baptised as a baby, came to Sunday School, were confirmed* at a suitable age, and took communion. In the classic Anglican, Roman Catholic or Orthodox Christian system there was no clear moment of conversion, you simply grew with God and developed into your deeper Christian faith, following the standard pattern. The 16th-century Reformers, however, concluded this wasn't good enough and insisted there had to be a point where a person really *believed* and was saved. As sectarianism and secularism advanced, and as European Christians made contact with non-Christian peoples around the world, the more traditional Churches developed similar ideas in order to cope with this new and unfamiliar situation. Those were, as I say, the Old Days. Now neither model seems to work very well, not for most of the people I interact with on the edges of the Church, and, frankly, not for me. There isn't a system, there isn't a structure, and people don't fit easily.

When I talk about baptism or confirmation with people, I have to admit that I got it all the wrong way round. Baptism, then taking communion, then confirmation, and being converted at the end of the process. At least I was only ordained *then*, but they do tend to check whether you believe in God before that actually happens, even in the Church of England.

I was dunked as a baby because that was what you did with babies. This was at St Mark's Church, Talbot Woods, in May 1970. I know it was May

1970 because when I was coming up for ordination I had to prove that I'd been baptised, and that involved writing off to the Dorset County Record Office, which now had charge of the Talbot Woods parish registers, for a copy of the relevant page. We were never given anything else: no certificate, no candle, nothing. According to my Mum the vicar made it rather clear we shouldn't be there at all because we weren't regular churchgoers. At a recent visit to the church I spotted the font where I was 'done' – a huge, shallow, supposedly Roman stone basin. It looks like a bird bath. As my family weren't worshippers, as I usually tell the story, my subsequent religious education consisted of drawing, at primary school, a picture of St Paul being lowered down the walls of Damascus in a basket. I can visualise it quite vividly, but have no idea why I was expected to produce it.

Seven years later my sister had a go in the Roman bird bath at St Mark's, which was the first time I'd taken part in an act of worship of any kind after my own christening, unless you count saying a prayer to mark the end of each school day, in front of my wooden chair which had been stood on the table, just like all the other children. 'Hands together, softly so/Little eyes shut tight./Father, just before we go, /Hear our prayer tonight.' I have no consciousness of actually knowing what I was doing at all. That was it then, until I was about 17 and cycled out to Christchurch Priory where I waited in the porch for a particularly droning, dreary service to finish so I could have a look around. Little was I aware that it was Good Friday, and the earlier stages of the Three Hours Devotion, so it would have been a long wait. Not the most accessible introduction to 'Church'.

Philosophy and religion were things I was interested in. Not enough actually to subscribe to any system of belief, but enough to want to find out about them. In my mid-teens I began to become interested, too, in the church buildings around me, in their dedications and how they fitted together: 'spotting' them in much the same way as other chaps spot trains. Thankfully I soon realised that there were an awful lot of churches, and not much to be gained by spotting them, but I still liked poking around them, and other sorts of ancient sacred sites – most notably holy wells, which was why I ended up writing so much about them.

It's difficult to recall now, but whatever I thought philosophically it didn't go far below the surface. As far as I had any ideas as such, they derived

from rather too much eclectic reading of Earth Mysteries* material and undigested Nietzsche. I watched a bit of the TV series *Sea of Faith*, and fell for the confident statement that belief was simply impossible in the modern world, that we had all gone too far for that. I took its presenter and author of the book based on it, radical Cambridge theologian Don Cupitt, very seriously. Almost incomprehensible now I look back on it.

I went to Oxford to study History. Churchy city, Oxford, that 'place of fetichists and ghost-seers' as Thomas Hardy called it, riddled with Anglo-Catholicism and suspect doctrines. It only intensified a strain of romantic medievalism which I'd already fallen victim to, convinced that the changes of the Reformation had been a disaster which cut European people off from the sacred landscape that sustained life, an awareness of which had dimly survived in medieval Christianity only then to be abandoned. I spent a term studying 19th-century Church history and the romanticism began to shift, attaching itself to the Tractarians.* That snowy winter I crunched around a frozen city with a head full of Newman, Pusey, Keble and Froude, imagining William Ward being carried through the streets one similarly snowy day in 1845 by Balliol undergraduates after the University stripped him of his degrees for praising overmuch the Roman Catholic Church, thus beginning the final crisis which would pitch the great Newman into the arms of Rome. It all introduced me to proper Christian thought, at any rate; that, and rather more oblique theological sources, such as medieval music and Kate Bush, who could hardly have imagined that her song 'Sensual World' was sketching out the doctrine of the Incarnation (it's the incarnation of Molly Bloom rather than Jesus).

At the same time I was putting together the argument that would eventually become my book on holy wells, *The Living Stream*, as a result of which I ended up junking much of the established story of those enigmatic holy sites. Real history was edging out the fantasy and demonstrating that a lot of what I'd thought made no sense at all. I also found myself abandoning the soft-headed relativism I'd developed. You couldn't tell anything about reality, I'd thought, following Dr Cupitt, because we can't trust the information of our senses; so, effectively, there is no reality, and everyone can make their own up. Now I thought I'd seen through this. No, you can't trust the information we receive from the phenomenal world *completely*, but given that there's nothing else, that's all we have to go on, and some approximations of reality are more convincing than others. You're a relativist? Right, walk out that tenth-floor window and see

whether you can wish gravity away. So I became a pretty hard-headed sceptic. It's all about the facts, ma'am.

From Oxford I went to Leicester for a course in Museum Studies. In the winter of 1991 I found the big, echoey Victorian church just down the hill from my flat was celebrating its centenary, and, for some reason which is still unclear to me, went to attend the grand centenary Mass. And grand it was. I was confronted with full-scale Anglo-Catholicism, all bells, chanting and incense. I ended up taking communion, knowing all about it from reading the Book of Common Prayer* and those Victorian controversialists; the only thing I didn't know was that I should have been confirmed first, of course. The church, St Paul's Kirby Road, is now closed, which is a worrying theme among the churches I've attended.

In fact, I didn't end up going there regularly, but to a church I passed every morning on my way to the University, St Mary de Castro. Now this is a charismatic building: long, dark, medieval, candles glinting in front of statues in the distance. The worship was (and still is, just) what used to be called 'Prayer Book Catholic': Solemn Mass in the middle of Sunday morning, Evensong and Benediction in the evening, servers in apparelled albs (if you don't know what those are, you don't need to worry yet), and the readings *chanted*. When I went I was handed a copy of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, but I suspect what they *actually* use is what used to be termed the 'interim rite' which is the Prayer Book with all sorts of Catholic bits dropped in, so most of the time I hadn't got the faintest idea which point the service had got to. But because I'd read my Tractarian controversialists, I knew that when the priest raised the tiny white wafer high above his head at the great gold altar way, way off at the east end, *that* was the moment that mattered, the moment the Word became Flesh. The first time I went to St Mary's was on St Lucy's Day, 13th December, 1991, with snow on the ground. I slipped over on the way more than once, and the manifold clergy and servers outnumbered the congregation, but the atmosphere was magical. The last occasion was Easter Day 1992. The usual priest was away and his replacement, virtually invisible through the sunlight-shafted clouds of incense, intoned the service in a posh nasal twang that sounded like Mongolian throat-singing. It was stupendous. How could anyone fail to be converted by that? Nevertheless I still had enough of my wits about me to realise it was also quite funny.

While working at a little museum in Wimborne, Dorset, close to where I grew up, I worshipped at the Minster there, gradually attending more and more regularly. It's important to understand that I didn't *believe* any of it. How could you? Christianity was a beautiful metaphor, a way of talking about the dark realities, and glorious possibilities, of human life. It answered my sense that things were not quite right with the world, and that terrible experiences could produce transcendence. Birth, death, and resurrection: the pattern of Jesus Christ's life showed what human beings could also be, but no more than that. Nobody, nobody believed in the supernatural stuff any more – did they? Only those nutcase Evangelicals, perhaps, and they wanted to wipe away the grand, beautiful worship that I'd found such significance in.

That was why I steered clear of my own parish church when I moved to Chatham a couple of years later, and ended up at SS Mary & John's in the town centre. This was once a pretty mainstream Catholic Anglican church which had seen better days, and now sat a bit forlornly next to the ring road which cut it off from the High Street (it closed a couple of years after I left and amalgamated with the United Reformed Church down the road). We had a fairly standard Parish Communion service on a Sunday morning, not that I went every week. Campbell, the vicar, tried to introduce a non-Eucharistic Family Service once a month, but it didn't really take off. Once a year the Guild of the Servants of the Sanctuary, a grand old Anglo-Catholic organisation, came and staged a frankly rather freaky Requiem Mass which always provided some amusing near-disaster, such as a server banging the thurible* into the pulpit and sending sparks flying everywhere.

The time came for confirmations and it suddenly dawned on me that I'd missed a bit of the process out, so I got added to the list of confirmands. I was concerned about the fact that in order to say the Creed, the Christian statement of belief, I had to re-interpret it virtually to death and wanted to have some kind of consultation with Campbell, but the other confirmands were all youngsters, 'and you know it all anyway', he said. He did come round for a chat but was breezily unconcerned at me being a 'devout unbeliever'. So, May 1995 came and I knelt in front of a man in very funny clothes who happened to be the Bishop of Rochester, and was confirmed into a faith I didn't actually believe in any normal sense of the word. Doubtless not the first, I know.

But it had begun to feel as though I was fighting a philosophical rearguard action. At SS Mary & John's, a sensible, middle-of-the-road Anglican church, I encountered Christians who *did* actually believe the magic stuff, and weren't obviously mad. They were just ordinary folk who got on with their lives, but had an extra dimension to those lives. I started reading the Scriptures again, not 'looking for loopholes' this time as WC Fields famously did, but actually trying to fathom out the *history* they represented. It suddenly struck me that, whoever had written the Epistles in the New Testament, in particular, they were clearly different people with different styles of writing and concerns – and occasionally they seemed to disagree with one another. The four Gospels were riddled with contradictions and problems; but that must mean that the Church had never significantly changed them. Most atheistical writings I came across assumed that the texts had been mucked about with, 'doctored by the Church', and were therefore untrustworthy. But they didn't *read* like records which had been fiddled with to a consistent purpose. If you were making stuff up, you wouldn't do it like this, you wouldn't include so much that undermined your case. That meant that, even if the details might not add up completely, the overall picture the New Testament presented of what had happened must be accurate.

And what was it that *had* happened? The only thing about the origins of Christianity you could be absolutely sure of was that a group of people became convinced that a man they knew had come back from the dead and, soon after that, that he had been God. It's a *mad* thing to think about someone you know, and would have been quite as mad then as it seems now, as pagan critics of Christianity were not slow to point out. So what had happened to make them think this? Fatally, it was an atheist friend of mine (he still is – both an atheist and a friend!) who suggested, 'Clearly *something* happened'. Gradually, I considered all the possible somethings, discarded them in turn, and felt myself, inexorably and horribly, being drawn to a conclusion that would change everything.

Finally this thought came: I realised I was concocting ever more baroque and convoluted explanations for the events of the New Testament, *simply in order to avoid* accepting what it said. I was telling myself that I was deciding whether what the texts said was true, whereas in reality I'd already concluded it couldn't be - because people don't come back from the dead. 'Sentence first, verdict afterwards', as the Red Queen says in *Alice*: not exactly a very scientific approach. And the alternative

explanations reached the point where they were so complex, so involved and so *unlikely* that they were unable to support themselves. And so they collapsed, and I had nowhere else to hide from belief.

This makes it sound a very intellectual process, which in a sense it was. But 'intellectual' doesn't mean 'unemotional'. Far from it, we often have considerable psychological investment in the things we believe intellectually, and resist changing them. Even scientists, who are supposed to approach things in a spirit of free, untrammelled enquiry, in practice often fall out when beloved theories are challenged. Changing from convinced atheism (albeit a sort of atheism which didn't stop one going to church) to Christian orthodoxy involved quite a readjustment, some aspects of which we'll talk about later. I was very miserable while this was going on, and very disorientated when it happened. Years later I read CS Lewis's spiritual autobiography, *Surprised By Joy*, in which he described himself as 'the most reluctant convert in England'; I could have made a claim to that title. One morning I knelt and prayed, out loud, to a God I was now no longer sure was a construct of my own will and imagination, but a real being, who might actually notice me – and demand things. Some people describe their conversions in terms of light, joy, hope, transfiguration; my feelings were closer to disgust, bitterness, having a bad taste in the mind. Of course it got better – it could hardly fail to, could it? – but it was an impeccably Gothic conversion.

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There are other Christian Goths, of course, and I regularly meet them. There are even a couple of Goth priests, though I've only met one and am not sure how comfortable *he* is with the label. Some Christian Goths are involved in their own local churches; Fr Chris once encountered one on the Youth Pilgrimage at Walsingham ('Young girl in my congregation says Goths worship the Devil and they're all gay. And you obviously don't worship the Devil' was his ice-breaker). Others have set up Christian groups which cater specifically for alternative people.

A few years ago the Goth Eucharist in Cambridge got a great deal of publicity. Fr Marcus Ramshaw, a Cambridge College chaplain, was attached to the church of St Edward the Martyr and, as a Goth himself, decided to establish a service in the church which Goths could come to before heading off to The Calling, the bi-monthly club night in the city

centre. It survived for several years despite a change in personnel, which is always the great test of these ventures. Another Goth Eucharist operates now and again at All Saints' Church, Chafford Hundred in Essex, where Alex Gowing-Cumber is vicar; he and a couple of colleagues have also staged Gothic Eucharists at the annual Christian festival Greenbelt, coupling the text of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer with plainchant and incense (not so far from St Mary de Castro really).

These events are well within the mainstream liturgical tradition of the Church of England. Asylum, in London, is an 'alternative Christian fellowship' which is well beyond official Anglican circles though it has good relationships with St Giles's Church, Cripplegate, opposite the pub where it usually meets. Asylum is more like a house-group than any liturgical event, and includes people who wouldn't necessarily identify themselves as Goths. Ara is a Goth (and other alternative) night run by Christian Goths and based at Holy Trinity Church in Salford – at least I think it still is, it's hard to work out quite. That isn't a worship event in any sense, but is more like a conscious venture to provide a space where conversations about God can happen and relationships develop.

I haven't spoken to many Christian Goths about their spiritual histories but get the impression that while they are mixed and often involve a period of time away from the Church and then faith reviving later (I recently met a young woman who was baptised at 25), actual conversion from complete unbelief is as rare as it is in wider society: people don't often change their views that radically, and Goths are no different from anyone else. At St Edward the Martyr they found that 'More than half of those attending had formerly been regular church attendees … a significant number were not, in the words of the Gospels, the lost sheep from the Christian fold; rather they represented 'the sheep that got away".

In British Gothdom, at any rate, my experience is that religious opinions reflect those of the population at large, though there are probably rather more pagans (of differing sorts; my friend Professor Purplepen, being a Classicist, is an adherent of the Graeco-Roman pantheon and keeps the nativity of the Divine Emperor Claudius as her special day. I regard Graeco-Roman paganism as my second favourite religion, slightly ahead of Shinto). We joke that paganism is to Goths what 'CofE' is to everyone else – it doesn't mean they've actually thought about it. Despite what a lot of non-Goths think, the number of actual Satanists is negligibly tiny, just

like the world outside. Real Satanists tend not to announce themselves very much, anyway. The great majority of Goths, religiously speaking, adhere to nothing very much, which is again not very different from British society generally.

Even Christian Goths aren't exactly homogenous, and reflect the differences between Christians more widely. The clergy at Cambridge and Chafford Hundred are moderate liberal-catholic Anglicans. The folk behind Ara are conventional and fairly hardline Evangelicals; Asylum has a far more DIY feel. I'm a rather trad Anglo-Catholic. When I used to belong to a Christian Goth mailing list based in the States there were Roman Catholics, Baptists and Orthodox Christians too, even a couple of Messianic Jews. There's only a limited amount of common ground between us all.

A few years ago I put together a little book called *Exuviae: a Fragmentary Grammar of Gothic*, which was my attempt to answer the question, What is Gothic? by looking at the various things which had been described as Gothic down the centuries, or which those Gothic works had quoted or looked back to. This was what I said about the Gothic approach to religion:

> The Gothic relationship with religion is, to put it mildly, troubled. Its characteristic mistrust of any rationalistic approach to human problems, and consequently all political solutions to them, might be seen to encourage a move towards the extremity of a religious viewpoint; but equally its insistence on the tainted quality of human authority and knowledge tends to make even the most sincere Goth believer an awkward and uncompliant one.
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> At its most superficial, Gothic uses religious images, especially the Christian cross and the occult pentangle, as badges of emotional extremity; rather more interestingly, they can become the ultimate signifiers of corrupted goodness, making blasphemy the ultimate rebellion (hence the persistent presence of religious motifs in Goth art and fashion, though blasphemy no longer has quite the shock value some modern Goths seem to imagine). From Sade's amplification of the folkloric Black Mass, which mixed the excitements of sacrilege with those of abusive sex, through Swinburne's hymn to 'Dolores, Our Lady of Pain', to Christian Death's slightly more sophisticated inversions of Christian prayers and images, the Gothic tradition disdains contending

> with lesser forms of power, and with typical bravado proceeds straight to the abuse and mockery of God. Trump that, it says.
>
> On the other hand, Catholic Christianity in particular exercises an alternate attraction and repulsion. It shares with the Gothic instinct a belief in the abiding corruption of man, and a system of imagery which combines blood and violence with both melancholy and transcendent beauty; yet it also demands acceptance of a restrictive and hierarchical system of authority. Many Goths wait until the safety of the deathbed before converting, or spend a lifetime in precarious belief but separation from the institutional Church. An excellent example is Baudelaire, whose declarations of allegiance to the Devil were matched by very orthodox beliefs and acts. Baudelaire's 'Litanies of Satan' have been interpreted in music by the modern artist closest to his spirit, Diamanda Galás. Her own masterwork, *The Plague Mass*, parodies the eucharist to achieve a deeply serious statement on behalf of all those shut out by established religious or social authority - one compatible with orthodox Christianity.

I spare you the final paragraph in which I was desperately rude about paganism. That was the mood I was in. Nevertheless by and large that all still seems pretty fair to me on re-reading it.

Two stories come to mind of great figures from the Gothic tradition and their relationship to Christianity – quite apart from all those 'deathbed conversions' of Aubrey Beardsley, Oscar Wilde, and so on. There is Lord Byron, booking into a hotel somewhere in Europe. His companion, the poet Shelley, had booked in ahead of him and under the 'Religion' column in the guestbook had written defiantly, 'Atheist'; Byron scratched it out and penned in 'Anglican'. 'I'm not having my daughter brought up an atheist like Shelley', he once fumed, and made sure little Allegra was packed off to a convent school.

Second story: the poet Baudelaire was in literary and financial exile in Belgium, a place he hated, trying and as usual failing to revive his fortunes. He was standing with a friend, the art critic Arthur Stevens, watching the annual procession in honour of the city of Brussels' patron saint, St Gudule. Bystanders made various sneering references to the ridiculous superstition of the event and how the Catholic Church would soon succumb to the forces of reason and sense. The procession wound past, everyone carrying a candle in honour of the saint. At the end was an

old man, stumbling and clearly having difficulty holding his candle and walking at the same time. Suddenly and without saying anything, Baudelaire left the side of his sceptic friend, crossed over to the old man, wordlessly took his candle from him, and offered him his other arm. After a moment of confusion, the old man took it, and walked towards the cathedral for Mass arm in arm with the condemned author of *The Flowers of Evil*. Around the same time Baudelaire recorded in his diary his determination to pray each day and to ask three departed souls to pray for him: his father; his childhood nurse, Mariette – and Edgar Allan Poe.

However, I'm not sure I was right about the significance of the cross in Gothic style. It crops up too often and too innocuously to have a blasphemous intent in most cases. I have a number of crosses which decorate my lapel occasionally. One was made by a friend, a very elaborate silver one with a gold-effect spider imposed on the top; another I bought from a stall at the Whitby Goth Weekend one year, a Steampunk* cross made out of watch cogs. Neither of these seems to me to be poking fun aggressively at Christianity or at Christ; there's a cheekiness about them, perhaps, but no hatred. But nor is it a merely decorative usage of the cross as in more conventional jewellery: it's a declaration of *something.* Because when a Goth wears a cross they've clearly made a definite point of doing so, they're not using them in the same casual way that the rest of the unchurched world does, but closer to the way Christians do.

Crosses are an emblem of death, of course, and therefore also of the importance of life, a *memento mori* and even more a *memento gravitae* – a way of signifying *importance*. In Gothic, the cross points out the gravity of whatever it's attached to, says 'this person means business' (whatever that business happens to be). What other symbol could you reach for to do that? It's very similar to Philip Larkin's conclusion as to why people (including himself) are continually drawn to visit churches despite not having any recognisably Christian beliefs:

> A serious house on serious earth it is,
> In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
> Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
> And that much never can be obsolete,
> Since someone will forever be surprising
> A hunger in himself to be more serious,
> And gravitating with it to this ground,
> Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,

If only that so many dead lie round.
('Church Going')

A sort of humanist rationale for poking around sacred places, for being attracted to them. In a different place and a different culture those places might perhaps be temples or mosques rather than Christian churches, but even then there would still be the myth of the Christ, and the story of the man from Nazareth crucified and risen. You can't get more serious, grander, than that. If Goths are, at some level, drama queens, nothing says drama like the Cross, nothing says more powerfully that *stuff matters* – even that *I* matter.

And of course this must have been part of what did it for me. Long before the intellectual process which I've described took hold and led me with seeming inevitability, in retrospect, to a place I had no intention of going, those old churchyards and churches 'laden with souls, holding to the east their hulls of stone' had been silently calling, hinting that there was more going on than there seemed to be. Larkin was right, a lot of this is to do with the presence of the dead, the sense of the weighted past sunk and layered down into the earth, something bigger and deeper than yourself and your own small moment; Goths are suckers for that. I was, anyway. I wonder whether it happens to others?

I've never been able quite to believe, as Goths often defensively maintain, that adopting Gothic style has no particular inner significance, that it says nothing about the person concerned. It certainly has significance to outsiders, often a negative one, and can bring a degree of social discomfort which occasionally edges into something more nasty – witness what happened to Sophie Lancaster, the Goth girl beaten to death by a gang of thugs tanked up on cheap drink in Lancashire in 2007. So why hold on to it so tenaciously unless it actually goes very deep into you? That's not to say Goth and Gothic are *about* any one particular thing; the individuals that make up the scene are far too diverse for that. After (I admit unfairly) insulting his book *Goth Chic* in *Exuviae,* I got into an argument over this with author Gavin Baddeley. He maintained Gothic was about transgression – artistic, sexual, moral – whereas I wasn't sure as many of the Goths I know are conservative to a degree which would surprise even themselves if anyone pointed it out ('Look at us', said a friend surveying a row of us sat on a cemetery bench, 'A seamstress, a teacher, a civil servant and a priest. People wouldn't believe it'). Instead I decided that if you

could draw any general conclusion at all concerning Gothic, it was that it's 'about' ambiguity – acknowledging the dire attraction of contradictory things.

The mix of those contradictory things is surely different for everyone, but among them might be the pull of traditional religion and the repulsion from it. I'm always rather reticent about what I am, and do, in Goth settings; I am, after all, a public representative of an institution which has much to repent. Yet I've never encountered any hostility. 'Great!' said a friend from the Oxford Goths when he found out I was at vicar school, rubbing his hands, 'I'll look forward to a few good discussions!' – which curiously we never had. All I noticed in that particular group was that people seemed inclined to blame me for the weather, and one young woman asked if I could do anything about people chanting in the house next to hers. 'Can't you exorcise them or something?' And that was before I even *got* the collar. The closest I've ever got to a negative response in Goth circles was from somebody who claimed the Church had damaged his brother in some way, and I never got to the bottom of that as it came in a short, shouted conversation in a loud club which is not a circumstance conducive to the discovery of deep matters. The commonest query comes typically from European-born women who aren't very clear about how the Church of England works and ask me with tender concern, 'Are you allowed to get married?' That they phrase it this way is another example of the basic conservatism (and romanticism) of a lot of Goths. None of them had any intention of marrying me themselves, which in some cases was rather a shame.

The time I was most pleased was when a group of us were sat outside a pub in London on a chilly winter evening before heading off to a museum exhibition, talking about the Bible. I was explaining some of the ambiguities and pointing out how Jesus spent most of his time answering people's questions with more questions. 'Well, Jesus was trying to make people think, wasn't he?' said one friend past the cigarette he was struggling to light. If only that simple insight could sink as deeply into the Christian Church.

Even more often I meet people who are not Christian now, but have had Christian phases or backgrounds and by no means reject or scorn them. Dorian was brought up a Roman Catholic and educated by the Jesuit Order: 'they were great, they taught me to think'. Alec was an acolyte at St

Peter's Barnstaple, still has bits of Evensong and Compline seared into his memory, and carried candles and banners at the Glastonbury Pilgrimage: 'we had to wear red velvet cassocks in the middle of the summer, ridiculous!' Janet had a boyfriend whose mother was a regular churchgoer and ended up standing in when they were short of an organist, long after her entry into the Goth world which took place when she was 17.

In short, being a Christian and mixing with Goths has proved far less uncomfortable a combination than you might expect. There is, however, still grit in the oyster – in both oysters, you might say.

2. No Longer In Charge

With a certain degree of self-contradiction, Gothic simultaneously celebrates autonomy and insists that the past cannot be escaped. Storehouses of the past, including museums, exercise great fascination. This display at the Witchcraft Museum in Boscastle, Cornwall, examines 'The Magic of Christianity', cheekily drawing attention to the magical elements of traditional Christian practices.

A tale of two suicides.

Two members of the London Goth Meetup Group ended their lives within a couple of months of one another. One was Miriam. I never met her and knew her only via someone to whom, it has to be said, she was an absolute pain. My friend Cylene had married Miriam's ex-boyfriend, which didn't stop Miriam calling Paul on the phone, sometimes for hours a day, to complain that her relationships never worked and nothing ever went right for her. Miriam was a eco-campaigner, an artist whose typical output was 'fairies and magic deer in sugar-coated elven woods', and presented herself as a starry-eyed optimist you whose lips never let slip a negative word. *I* wanted to slap her, and I'd never met her. On the plus side, she believed in her causes and actually did something about them. Even if her art wasn't exactly deep or original, she was a considerable draughtsman and had a great decorative (as opposed to strictly artistic) talent. She could have done society a lot of good. But she was also a dangerously mixed-up woman who seemed unable to face the truth about herself or the world around her, and rejected any suggestion that she should seek help for her depression and obsessiveness. One morning Miriam's sister called Paul to tell him she had killed herself, and Cylene called me: 'she actually did it'. As is often the case in the modern world, Miriam still has a ghostly existence on the Internet. As I write, her LGMG profile is still there, with its studio portrait photos of a rather too skinny but beautiful young woman in immaculate Gothic Lolita* costumes, looking completely serene and self-controlled. You see something different in those images now.

Dan was a different case: I knew him better, but arguably knew *about* him less. Miriam was on the edges of the alternative scene, Dan was right in the middle of it, a regular attender at the clubs and LGMG events. He was married, and we knew his wife (who was out and about less frequently) rather had to keep him in line, and regularly ribbed him about it. He could be infuriating, and got into arguments with other friends, but this was usually because he cared about how people were treated and how the group ought to work, and had a tendency to speak not just his mind but way beyond his mind when he had too many drinks inside him. He was extremely funny and larger-than-life, as people with an alcohol problem sometimes are – and it gradually became clear that that was what he had. Whichever event he was at, he could always be found looking out for the new members of the group and making sure they were involved and talked to. He never took anything seriously, apart from the wellbeing of others.

When I led my Goth Walk around the City Churches in 2009 Dan turned up in a clerical collar for which I upbraided him. When we reached the tower of St Mary Somerset I pointed out how it spent part of its career as a public lavatory and that when I'd visited it to prepare the walk 'the largest dog turd in Christendom was roughly where Dan is now standing'. 'I haven't evolved', he answered, quick as a flash. Things gradually got more rocky for him and despite several attempts to get himself together he had a stay in hospital. After some time he told family members that he was improving, discharged himself and later that day ended his life. Again, when I think of Dan's colossal good qualities it's the sense of waste that saddens me most, the loss of the good he could have done, even more than the thought of a person dying alone and convinced that the world will be better off without them.

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In 2008, the journalist Charlotte Raven was diagnosed with Huntington's Disease, an incurable degenerative brain disorder that progressively robs its sufferers of voluntary movement and the ability to communicate. Once sheer grief was out of the way, she thought of suicide. It was a joyous notion, too.

> My first suicidal thought was a kind of epiphany – like Batman figuring out his escape from the Joker's death trap. It seemed very "me" to choose death over self-delusion. Ah ha, I thought. For the first time since the diagnosis, I slept through the night.

For Ms Raven (at this point, anyway, she later changed her mind) suicide was a means, *the* final means, of asserting control.

> Without autonomy and the capacity for self-determination, life is meaningless. Merely existing isn't enough. … I'd be able to "author" my death in the way I authored my wedding, ensuring that it was poetic and resonant. … I'd never had a normal job and found it hard to cope with people telling me what to do. My opinions were my own, developed without reference to God, convention or morality. I considered myself intellectually autonomous … Dynamic decision-makers regard a loss of control over their lives as a fate worse than death. They perceive patient-hood as degrading. I perceived it as a form of oppression. HD seemed like the worst kind of corporate boss,

> defining my agenda and limiting my capacity for self-expression. Resisting gave me a buzz I hadn't felt since my youth. I was fighting for my rights!

Of course this medically-propelled death-drive is different from depression, but the rhetoric of freedom and autonomy can be the same in both cases – certainly, the feeling that death equates to liberty is. The Goth world has a rhetoric of freedom and autonomy, and people involved in it tend to want to think of themselves as free and autonomous. When prospective members sign up to the LGMG, they're asked, among other questions, 'What does Goth mean to you?' and very often their answers include statements along these lines: 'being who you want to be'; 'a way to express myself'; 'an outlook on life that is free-thinking'; 'Goth accepts me', were answers I gleaned just now from about a dozen member profiles. Being free to be who you are (and 'authenticity' is an important theme which we'll consider later) is terribly important – provided, naturally enough, that 'who you are' fits in with the Gothic continuum. But the Gothic continuum is broad, flexible, and forgiving, after all.

You might say that the ultimate autonomy is your control over your own death. Even if everything else is unbearable, it's possible ultimately, fully, to opt out – to deny the world and its powers any final say over what you do and how you behave. It's a desperate expression of freedom, of course, because it rules out any future expressions, but it makes the point that your life belongs to you, nobody else, and that this choice, if none other, is down to you to make. A troubled person once said to me, paradoxically but honestly, that the thought of being able to opt out of life was what prevented him actually doing so. It meant he could face the misery of another day without collapsing: he had a last weapon to hold in reserve.

I don't intend to contribute to the stereotype that Goths are, in general, suicidally depressed. There are some of whom this is true, of course, but it's true of any set of human beings, anywhere. When Nancy Kilpatrick researched *The Goth Bible* (2002) several of her interviewees not only rubbished any suggestion that Goths were, as a group, unusually prone to suicidal fantasies or acts, but some claimed being involved in the Goth world had helped them move away from just such thoughts. 'I suffered from clinical depression, and still do', reported Malinda, 'but control it without medication. Since becoming active in the Goth scene, I have found a love of life that will always keep me from such actions. I have so

much fun now, I want to live to be a hundred and ten!' What I'm interested in here is the issue of autonomy bound up with the desire to control your own life in this most extreme of ways.

Years ago I assumed I would die at my own hand, at some future moment when it would become clear that the time had come. It was an existential matter more than anything else, a belief that my life was mine and that it was right and proper that I should choose the time and manner of my surrender of it. I had the scenario worked out. I had a recording of 'Lasciate i Monti' from Monteverdi's opera *Orfeo*, and wanted to go out listening to it, opening a vein in my wrist in a warm bath. In my fantasy, I would drift out of the world listening to the swirling, ecstatic music Monteverdi had designed to be sung by a chorus of shepherds and nymphs, expressing nothing but joy and delight. Dying was the only moment I could imagine being purely joyful, and 'Lasciate i Monti' was easily the most joyful piece of music I possessed. I would come away from ten minutes listening to this tiny, sixty-second chorus feeling cleansed, hopeful, renewed in my determination to be an individual.

One of the key issues for me as I felt myself being sucked towards deciding that God was real was this matter of autonomy, of sorting out for myself was what real and unreal, what was right and wrong. I've already mentioned reading (though not thoroughly digesting) some of the writings of the bizarre 19th-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche; and the keystone of his ideas was the notion that because there is no external standard of morality, or in fact reality, to judge ourselves or each other by, all we can do is make it up for ourselves. It is, indeed, our solemn duty to do so. That's what being really human is about, devising rules to live by – and let the toughest, most determined set of ideas prevail. An awful lot of what I thought and did was tied up with this idea, from politics to religion and philosophy to, obliquely, the way I thought my life would end. Somehow, and more and more desperately, I'd managed to fasten Christianity on to this, but it became terribly clear that I was sewing together fabrics that simply would not match, and one of them would have to go.

That was profoundly *frightening* as well as merely disorientating. If God was real I was not *free*, not, anyway, in the sense I'd assumed. If God was real, my own ideas and standards might not be the ones I should necessarily shape my life by. There would, logically, be others, more firmly

based in knowledge I had through my human limitations no access to, and it was those to which I would be answerable – and to him who set them down. What would they be? What would I be expected to surrender as a result?

This may seem like an exclusively modern dilemma, but it isn't. Howell Harris, leader of the 18th-century Welsh Revival, was converted in 1735, only after a long internal struggle:

> I felt a strong impression on my mind to give myself to God as I was, and to leave all to follow Him; but presently I felt a strong opposition to it, backed with reasons that if I should give myself to the Lord I should lose my liberty, and would not then be my own, or in my own power.

In Weybridge I went to visit a young couple to arrange the baptism of their baby daughter. They weren't married, which wasn't a problem for us (it might have been for some churches), but I did feel moved to make *some* reference to the fact that they'd done things in what the Church considered was an *unorthodox* order. Had they thought about marrying, I asked? If nothing else I was drumming up some custom. 'We're not ready to make that sort of commitment yet', said Natalie. I went away thinking, well, you were ready enough to produce another human being together, isn't that something of a commitment? (Actually Natalie was quite right – her boyfriend was a waster and the next time I met her after the baptism she'd turfed him out). But now I think I was wrong to think that: now, I understand what they meant. Having a child turns your life upside-down, but you don't *share* your life with that child. The child is bone of your bone and flesh of your flesh, but you don't, in the Bible's phrase, *become one flesh* with him or her. That only happens with a partner you are committed to. Letting someone into your life, permanently, sexually, on a level of equality, is a deeper commitment than parenthood. Your child will make demands on you, but is supposed to grow away from you towards adulthood and independence; you and your partner, on the other hand, are supposed to grow in the same direction, into interdependence. It's a bigger thing, and a more daunting one.

You can see the parallel with God. 'Have you ever thought of letting Jesus into your life?' asks the cartoon evangelist on the doorstep, as though it was a decision of the same order as buying double-glazing or changing your broadband supplier, as though it was an entirely uncomplicated matter. It isn't. Let Jesus into your life and he'll walk round the house

telling you what to change, and that's just to start. It's not going to end, either: you're not going to be able just to walk out on that relationship, because your sense of self will be too bound up with it. It will hurt. Do you really want to get into that?

Placing not just a *high* value on autonomy but putting it as *the* highest consideration assumes that, at a deep level, our actions don't affect one another or, if they do, it doesn't or shouldn't matter. The suicides of Miriam and Dan certainly did. My friend Cylene, Miriam's 'rival', has herself had suicidal temptations. At Miriam's funeral, Cylene 'looked at her in the coffin and thought, Why do *you* get to be dead?' Within a day or two she was back in another spiral of self-harm and 'attempts' which were only curtailed by her husband's constant presence. Dan's death provoked a wave of self-examination and stress among those who knew him, relationships breaking down, people falling out. It is worth admitting that not all the consequences of Miriam and Dan's deaths were negative; from a Christian point of view, God works to bring good out of even the worst circumstances. But the point is that the suicides were not isolated events as a result of which everyone else shrugged and carried on their lives unaffected; and who knows what might have happened had they still been alive? Again, the consequences of them living might have been both negative and positive, but that's not important: there would have *been* consequences, that's the thing. In Jeffrey Eugenides's novel *The Virgin Suicides* and the film based on it, a community is traumatised by the multiple and never-quite-explained suicides of the Lisbon sisters, and those who knew them are still turning the matter obsessively over some decades later.

Many years ago I heard a radio play about a young woman who has decided to kill herself, and the attempts of her family and friends to persuade her not to. They are baffled by the fact that she appears to have no reason for her decision. She isn't ill, she isn't visibly depressed, she's had no traumatic experiences; she merely prefers not to live. Nobody has any arguments to bring against this, nothing that can penetrate her cheerful acknowledgement of life's purposelessness and her determination to leave it. At the time I was impressed by this. I saw the story as a fable of self-direction and truthfulness and, indeed, without importing some kind of purpose to life from outside itself there's very little any of us could say to the mythical young woman.

In real life embarking on 'the final act of self-determination' isn't a choice that anyone takes against a blank mental canvas. Even those who take the trip to the death-clinics in Switzerland have reached a point where pain or disability outweighs the desire to live; the decision comes out of a set of circumstances, and, usually, far more – the weight of a lifetime's disappointments, traumas, imbalances and sorrows. So Daniel James, the 23-year-old rugby player paralysed in an accident, chose to kill himself in 2008 rather than adjust to a new way of living, while the actor Christopher Reeve, injured in much the same way, chose to carry on. The difference between them lay not in the objective fact of what had happened to them, but in the type of people they were; you could argue that neither of them was acting 'freely', at least not *so* freely they could defy their essential character. Much moral theory is based on the idea of autonomy, the notion that when we take a decision we come to it free of the past, unencumbered by anything that may have gone before, but our actions are affected by (and affect in their turn) whole sets of people and circumstances we know nothing about.

Some of these circumstances are the purest chance. Novelists from Thomas Hardy onwards have mused on the role of chance in the course of events and therefore how human beings react to them, bringing to them as they do their own unique mixtures of history and predilection. Barbara Erskine was recently criticised for hinging one of her mystery plots on the lack of mobile phone reception in a particular place: surely in this day and age nowhere is beyond the reach of electronic communication, argued the reviewer. I remember staying at a retreat house and discovering my mobile would only work along a ten-yard stretch of pavement a couple of hundred feet from the entrance, so had my own personal 'novel plot' depended on responding to an urgent message that would have been crucial. Who knows what the results might have been?

But chance of that sort, which acts on us from the outside, is a superficial, obvious player in the game of manipulating our reactions and emotions. I know that there are times when I can react completely differently to the same stimulus or set of events depending on what may have happened to me over the course of the day, how tired I am, how many things have gone right or wrong, who I may have spoken to. That proverbial saying about the straw breaking the camel's back exists for a reason. And our shifting, changing attitudes are rooted more than we perhaps realise in the body. I

even find *digestion* has a great effect on my mood and therefore my ability to cope with events. That's how earthy this gets.

People in the past understood this better. Marsilio Ficino was tutor to Lorenzo 'the Magnificent' de' Medici when Lorenzo's grandfather Cosimo was ruler of Florence. Between 1480 and 1489 he wrote *De Vita Tres Libra* – 'Three Books About Life' – in which he traced the crucial influence of outside factors on different personality types. If you're a scholar, said Marsilio, someone who works with their mind, you're likely to have been born under the influence of the planet Saturn, and therefore to be of a *melancholic* disposition. You need to be careful about avoiding despair. That means watching what you eat and drink, your daily routine, even your living arrangements, to balance your gloomy nature with other influences.

Other factors act on us over the longer term. Habits and addictions create interior dispositions which are difficult to fight against: 'cells that fire together wire together', as the great Canadian neuroscientist Donald Hebb put it, and once the brain has grown in a particular direction it takes a lot of effort to change it. Finally there is memory. We each of us carry with us vast warehouses of experiences which we may not remember in any detail but that feed into who we are. Memories that *are* deliberately recalled, and practised, are especially important in forming what we think about ourselves and other people. Human beings flow in and out of each other constantly, you might say.

Although Goths as individuals put a high value on autonomy, Gothic *culture* has always understood autonomy's limits rather better than other rhetorics have. Charles Baudelaire described the sense of being oppressed by the past with delicious grimness in *Les Fleurs de Mal*:

> More memories than if I'd lived a thousand years!
>
> A giant chest of drawers, stuffed to the full
> With balance sheets, love letters, lawsuits, verse
> Romances, locks of hair rolled in receipts,
> Hides fewer secrets than my sullen skull.
> It is a pyramid, a giant vault
> Holding more corpses than a common grave.
> I am a graveyard hated by the moon
> Where like remorse the long worms crawl, and turn

Attention to the dearest of my dead …

In Gothic the past is never quite gone: it always retains the uncanny possibility of return just at the least convenient moment. Goths often criticise the present as drab and conformist, and attack it by adopting elements from the dress and lifestyles of the past (or a fantasized future). For many academic critics of Gothic narrative and art, this sense that what has been denied and repressed may come back and be discovered where it should not be is the key to understanding the whole genre. Siouxsie and the Banshees sing in 'Not Forgotten':

You buried it so deep
So safe in hidden sleep
But like a tell-tale corpse
Rises to the surface
Over-ripe & bloated
In naked time-lapsed truth
Thought it was lost forever
Remember this

You may have detected a tone to the divine Siouxsie's offering which hints that this 'return of the repressed' stuff is far from being all about gloomy introspection. The past is inescapable and can come back, but that may not be in the interest of those who have arranged the present to their own benefit. The resurgence of forgotten things, hidden secrets, denied truths and suppressed memories has the potential to discomfit the comfortable. This, after all, is what the very first 'Gothic novel' of all, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, is about: the usurping Duke Manfred getting his comeuppance at the hands of the lost true heir (of course much of this was lifted from *Hamlet*, and ancient Greek drama is littered with plots driven by and towards the discovery of terrible secrets. It's a very old storyline). Sometimes, the prospect of the past returning to assault the present and those who are currently in charge of it is rather an enjoyable one – if, that is, the present is a place you feel shut out from.

Chance, circumstance, memory, the pattern of past events stamped into our brains and even genes – there is a lot that constrains our autonomy. Yet as we become aware how much our own attitudes and behaviour are contingent not on our pure reason but on so many other factors, there comes the possibility of kindness, of forgiveness, both of ourselves and of

others. Forgiveness, how to forgive, is one of the matters people ask me about most often. One of the keys to it is knowledge of what led the person who has hurt us to the point at which they took the decision to hurt, and how they became the sort of person who would take that decision. This is something different from 'putting ourselves in the other person's place', because the point is exactly that we aren't them; yes, we might have behaved differently, but *we* weren't faced with the choice to hurt or to refrain from hurting, *they* were, a unique individual with a history infinitely different from ours. The trouble is that knowledge of that infinitely different personal history is something we can never truly have: only God, from his objective vantage point, can; which, I conclude, is why he is able to forgive infinitely. Infinite forgiveness can only come from infinite knowledge. 'He remembers that we are but dust', says the Psalmist; and, from the Cross itself, from the ultimate site of suffering, God born as man looks on those who are torturing him and cries, 'Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do'.

That doesn't mean any sense of irresponsibility. On the contrary, it makes human beings *infinitely* responsible, because we don't understand the true ramifications of what we do, can't see the far edges of the ripples caused by our sinfulness and who will get caught up in it. Part of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* is an account of the life and teaching of the fictional Russian Orthodox monk and *staretz*, or spiritual guide, Father Zossima. Zossima says:

> My young brother asked forgiveness of the birds: it may seem absurd, but it is right nonetheless, for everything, like the ocean, flows and comes into contact with everything else: touch it in one place and it reverberates at the other end of the world. … It would be easier for the birds, and for the child, and for every animal, if you were yourself more pleasant than you are now … Then you would pray to the birds, too, consumed by a universal love … that they too should forgive your sin.

Yet what we find so hard to grasp is that total responsibility does not rule out total forgiveness. Instead, as we look at ourselves, others, and the world truly and rationally, we know how mysterious are the forces that act on us, and how mysterious the results, good and bad, of what we do. All we can do in response is to forgive and ask forgiveness.

Learning humility, learning, in a Christian sense, to see things truthfully, is hard, because our Western intellectual tradition insists on insisting on the idea of autonomy. It's our own self-reliance that we have to be educated out of; our own sense of self-containment, of being supremely an individual with tight and hard boundaries, which must be pierced. It is said that Metropolitan Anthony, the Orthodox archbishop in Britain until his death in 2003 and a well-known spiritual director, was once approached by a young man who complained of having reached a blockage in his prayer life having mastered all sorts of spiritual techniques. Anthony diagnosed too much self-reliance and prescribed prostrating himself on the ground a hundred times a day. It did the trick. Not long before going on retreat ahead of being ordained a priest I'd read *The Brothers Karamazov* and in it the Elder Zossima's remarks about the salutary effect of prostration, that it encouraged a Christian to embrace the whole earth in total humility and try to love it as God does (Father Zossima is indeed fictional but his ideas come from a very real Orthodox tradition that Dostoevsky knew well). Early on the morning of my ordination I went into the chapel of the convent where we were staying and felt impelled to do just that in front of the altar – just as well nobody was around. It was, indeed, strangely moving. That posture, depicting in the body complete humility and love, had the effect Zossima predicts (I suppose I shouldn't be surprised): it feels, ridiculously as it might seem, as though it puts you physically in contact with everything.

Politically I've always been a liberal with a small and a capital letter 'L'. The purest and most thrilling summary of Liberalism, I've always felt, was that delivered by Rhys Hopkin Morris, a Liberal MP for two stints in Parliament before and after World War Two. 'There is', Morris once stated, 'no man alive who is sufficiently good to rule the life of the man next door to him'. There could be no clearer, more devastating expression of the core of Liberalism than that: the business of political activity is to liberate human beings from the exercise of authority over one another. But we make a mistake in blurring together in our minds God and the human authorities who constrain us. That was the mistake that I made for so long - understandable I hope, since those human authorities have very often claimed God's sayso for their own dubious and sometimes murderous pronouncements. I still thrill rather to Morris's ringing dictum. But I've found that God isn't covered by it. I am not quite what I thought I was, that untrammelled free individual. But I am not less than that; '*I*' am something more.

3. Into the Fire

Among more old-fashioned Catholically-inclined churches – whether Roman, Anglican or Lutheran – the colour for vestments used to celebrate the Requiem Mass, the mass for the dead, is black. This particularly fine example was sold a few years ago by a second-hand vestment emporium. Rather shamefully I have two *black sets: one was a gift, while the other is an Art Deco set I couldn't resist buying from eBay.*

In 1995 BBC Radio 4 began broadcasting a comedy series set in Hell, *Old Harry's Game*. The earlier episodes centred on the debates between a world-weary Satan, thoroughly bored of running the Inferno, and the inveterately optimistic Professor, who had apparently arrived in Hell by accident but as a rationalist wouldn't at first believe it was anything other than an interesting delusion. The following is only a paraphrase of their first encounter, but as I've not heard it for fifteen years you'll have to forgive me. It gets the gist, anyway.

Satan: According to this, Professor, you've led an absolutely blameless life. You shouldn't be here at all. I do apologise, these administrative cock-ups happen occasionally. We'll get it sorted out.

Professor: That's all right, it's been a fascinating experience.

Satan: Oh, just one thing: you do *believe* in God, don't you?

Professor: Of *course* not, the notion of a deity is *completely* irrational – that image of an old man with a beard living in the clouds, utterly *preposterous*.

Satan: Ah! That'll be it. *Completely* preposterous, I know. I've told him myself more than once. Trouble is, he does get rather annoyed when people don't believe in him. Livid, in fact. You might argue that being God he should be above that sort of thing, but there you go …

Hell is a matter for laughter in popular culture, although *Old Harry's Game* is moderately sophisticated in its humorous treatment of the Inferno. This may be partly because of the *extremity* of Hell – there's nowhere else to go, imaginatively, beyond a place of eternal punishment, and because it presents the ideas of good and evil with absolute clarity, to take that clarity and blur it again seems funny, especially when we imagine placing there people who, on the face of it, should be elsewhere completely. Hell is satirical. In *Old Harry's Game* reputedly virtuous people end up among the damned (Jane Austen is portrayed as a foul-mouthed ladette, for instance), while the apparent good qualities of others turn out to be vices (Mother Teresa is there). Years ago in *The Secret Policeman's Ball* Rowan Atkinson played an equally jaded Devil welcoming Hell's newcomers to their fate:

> Fornicators, any fornicators? … God, there are a lot of you … And Christians. Yes, Christians, I'm afraid you may be feeling a little disorientated at this point. Well, sorry to have to tell you: but the Jews were right.

I've had a number of conversations about the possibility, given the laws of physics and logic, of Hell freezing over. It's a way of considering the impossible, of how the ridiculous could be logically necessary, which is always potentially funny.

Goths are prone to endorse Hell and Hellishness as a signifier of revolt, of doing their own thing – the sort of independence and autonomy we thought about in the last chapter. After all, if independence is what you're aiming at, you simply have to be independent of God, especially if he would prefer you enjoyed yourself less than you would like. Equate sin with fun, and playing with damnation becomes a marker of liking fun. As some friends put it during the excitement over the alleged End of the World in May 2011: 'What no one realises is that us sinners have got it right, it's the boring dull fuckers and the god botherers who are gonna burn in hell, we're off to a heaven full of strip clubs and brothels'. A popular Goth/fetish club night which operated out of the Vauxhall Colosseum names itself Antichrist; it doesn't have any particularly blasphemous agenda other than the name, and I know Christian Goths who've been there and managed to emerge with their sensibilities not too badly outraged, but the title does throw down a challenge, or point out a pose, anyway. 'Sin' or 'Syn' crops up quite often in the names Goths choose for themselves, and I wonder whether the altered spelling hints at an urge to undermine the concept behind the word as much as to reclaim it as something worthwhile for a free, self-directing human being.

But sometimes the laughter is nervous, and sometimes it isn't there at all. The concept of 'sin' makes no sense without a theology to go with it, and a God behind it, and that opens up anxieties. Lord Byron developed an early sense of his own irredeemable wickedness, thanks to the very particular theological approach of his childhood nurse. In adult life he veered between believing he was helplessly forever damned, and not believing anything at all, and found neither condition particularly happy. 'Who will be saved?' is a question that has haunted the Church (its Western half rather more than the Eastern one) down the centuries and one to which

Christians have devised a variety of answers. A Goth who develops any degree of faith, just like all other Christians, has to face it too.

It's not a question I am going to answer clearly, because I don't believe there is a clear answer. In three of the Gospels (Matthew chapter 19, Mark 10 and Luke 17) a man asks Jesus 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' and at first all he gets is more questions asked back at him before the disconcerting answer comes, 'Sell all you have, give it to the poor, and follow me.' Not everyone who questions Jesus about this gets that sort of response; it seems to be intended for this man because Jesus perceives that wealth and possessiveness are his special problem. By the time the early Church got going they'd found their way to a far simpler formula than Jesus's tricky psychological probing – as Peter is recorded as saying in the Acts of the Apostles, 'believe in the name of Jesus and you will be saved', rescued from the consequences of universal and individual sin, plucked out of the devouring flames, simple as that. But what 'belief' actually means, what the *content* of belief is and how you judge its quality – there's the rub.

Catholic Christians tend to argue that the best way of ensuring that you are 'saved' is to 'participate in the sacraments', to do the things the Church does to signify the saving work of God – baptism, communion and so on. Evangelical Christians tend to stress the importance of an individual act of faith, 'accepting Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour', as the phrase goes, and in fact you don't have to search far on the Internet before you discover a prayer that enables you to do just that. 'Pray this prayer with your heart and you will be saved!' promises the blurb, or somesuch words.

Some Christians, even Goth Christians, are satisfied with answers like that. Ara, the alternative club night, or 'sacred space', run out of Most Holy Trinity church in Salford, is (or was) organised by fairly conservative evangelicals who responded to questions about Goth and Christianity from an academic interviewer in clear terms: 'If a person doesn't know Christ as their Lord, then it really doesn't matter what they look like or believe – they still need a personal relationship with Christ in order to be saved from eternal damnation'. The positive side of such answers is that they remove anxiety: we know we are saved, we are in God's good books, because we have done X. The negative side is that as fast as the answers remove anxiety, they provoke complacency, and this is the paradox that Christians have struggled with.

I had a parishioner who was mentally ill. Many parishes have a Trevor, sometimes more than one. My Trevor had a degree of congenital brain damage, a set of very challenging life experiences, and had developed paranoia, psychosis and obsessive-compulsive disorder. I couldn't avoid thinking that his discovering religion had made matters even worse because it added a new layer of things for him to worry about, though I suppose he would still have had delusions about something else even if religion hadn't been part of the picture. Trevor hadn't found his faith as a result of being part of a church community; instead he had sat, on his own, reading the Bible. I had to struggle to get most of my congregation to read their Bibles at all, but Trevor I couldn't stop even when it would have done him good to. He periodically got very angry with God, and each time I found myself hoping that he might actually carry through his threats and have nothing more to do with the Lord. At least that might mean he would stop phoning me at ridiculous times of the day to ask questions about the Scriptures. Sadly for Trevor, he'd come up against the vaguenesses and ambiguities of the Bible and what it says about being saved, without the bedrock of common sense which most people have to blunt the impact of those vaguenesses. Even when the doctors managed to find a pharmaceutical regime that stopped him hearing what he interpreted as demonic and angelic voices telling him he was 'condemned', he still over-analysed his thoughts and feelings and concluded that if he felt miserable God had abandoned him, or fretted dreadfully over imaginary sins (while curiously never mentioning what I thought were real ones). Trevor was a tremendously fearful person, his fears and insecurities affecting his view of God. Given how badly life had treated him, it was understandable if he thought God would behave in the same arbitrary way, and the Bible didn't provide him with a path through, with any clear means of knowing whether he was saved or damned. He came up against the concern of the Scriptures to give believers assurance while trying to stop them being complacent. That's not an easy tension to live with if you're mad.

And even if you're not mad to start with, it can nudge you that way. The religious changes of the 16th century we call the Reformation made the problem particularly acute. The German friar who started the whole business, Martin Luther, that combative and contradictory character, rebelled against the medieval Church's objective account of what saved a soul – the sacrifice of Jesus infallibly working through the sacraments – and rested the believer's hopes on an internal experience. 'We believe in

the heart and so are justified, and we confess with the lips and so are saved', St Paul had written to the Christians of ancient Rome. Ah, thought Luther, there's the answer. *Sola Fide*, faith alone, is what saves us. We don't need all this supernatural garbage (actually Luther thought we *did* still need some of it): all the work is done in the sinner's heart when he repents and turns to Jesus. A little later John Calvin added the matter of *predestination* to the mixture. God, being eternal, all-knowing and all-powerful, must logically have known from the beginning of time who would be saved and who would not, and, furthermore, if we are by our nature so corrupt and vile that we can't do anything to contribute towards our own salvation, then the actual *choice* must lie with God too. For reasons of his own – ineffable, inscrutable reasons – God had eternally elected that some souls would be saved and some damned, and nothing they could say or do would change the matter.

Nothing they could say or do. Calvinist clergy in churches newly freed from the 'tyranny' of Catholicism found themselves confronted with the Trevor Question. On the one hand there were nervous souls who couldn't grasp the effectual power of God's love and wallowed in despair. Other Christians wore their conviction of faith with pride, confident that God had chosen to save them no matter what they actually did with their lives. In irritation, towards the end of the century, an English Calvinist thinker called William Perkins came up with possibly the cruellest and most perverse doctrine any branch of the Christian Church has ever devised: 'temporary faith'. God could, he said, for reasons unknown to us poor sinners, grant some Christians the *appearance* of faith, accompanied by goodness, meekness, zeal, inner feelings of peace and reconciliation with Him, but appearance would be all it was; it would not be the *kind* of faith that saved them. And, Perkins observed, such 'temporary' faith could last a person's entire lifetime, externally indistinguishable from true, saving faith. Which was which was impossible to tell. Unsurprisingly, as Reformation historian Diarmaid McCulloch remarked, 'Perkins died in what seems to have been a state of clinical depression'.

There is a classic story in the Gothic literary tradition of religion driving a person mad. In 1824 James Hogg, an Ettrickshire farmer who had already penned various stories and poems about supernatural happenings, published *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. In the story, Robert Wringhim, an illegitimate laird's son raised by a Calvinist minister, believes himself to be one of God's elect. On the very day this

conviction dawns, he encounters a mysterious man in the woods – a mirror-image of himself, who with pious arguments gradually breaks down all his objections to various acts of evil. He eventually works out who the stranger is, but by then he has only one way of release. Whether the man who calls himself Gil Martin is a product of Wringhim's own fevered imagination, or something more, is never clear: Wringhim is trapped in a spiritual landscape in which there are no landmarks, no clear indication whether a step forward will take him towards God or away from him.

Usually when I baptise somebody I use chapter 3 of the Gospel of St John as the Bible reading, because it introduces the concepts behind baptism but contains the ambiguities as well. Jesus is speaking to the learned Jew Nicodemus. Presumably Nicodemus has come to Jesus to let him know that there are some in the religious hierarchy who think he's kosher, if you'll excuse the metaphor. But he's afraid and has come under cover of night. All he says is, 'look, we know you've come from God because the things you do prove it', but Jesus perceives that what Nicodemus unconsciously wants is to be assured that, despite being an Establishment man, he's OK with God. 'You can't see the kingdom of God unless you're born again', says Jesus, and they begin discussing what this cryptic idea might mean. Because the original Greek text has no quotation marks, we don't know exactly where the words of Jesus finish and the Gospel writer's start; but whoever's they are, this is what it says from verse 16 on:

> For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be seen clearly that their deeds have been done in God.

I quote this at some length because it seems to me to illustrate the problems. There is no sense here of any clear process, but rather confusion. People are drawn to the darkness (that is, they refuse to believe in Jesus) because they do evil and so are predisposed to refuse the offered

gift. Yet they are inclined to do evil *because* they do not believe, and 'evil' is thought of in terms of refusing Jesus. This passage reads like its author is struggling with ambiguity, trying to reconcile what he believes and what he observes happening in himself and other people, rather than having worked out a coherent picture of how people are 'saved', and so his ideas chase one another around.

Is there a way through? I don't swallow the doctrine of predestination as John Calvin expressed it, but, like a lot in the tradition of the Church, it seems to be groping towards a truth which it doesn't yet understand. Whatever else, it suggests that the nature of God's time is different from ours. We experience events in chronological time: they happen in sequence, one thing following another. But God exists outside time, in 'eternity', and perceives all events as present at once. So it is indeed the case that God sees the final fate of every soul, but we can't expect to trace what has happened in any single person with any accuracy. We are indeed 'saved' through believing, but it's a process and not an event. This fits in rather well with the observation of modern physics that time is a property of physical space (while God is obviously not physical), and those of modern neuropsychology that our brains seem to anticipate decisions before they are actually taken, and that time does not work the way we intuitively think it does. The theological problems reflect the limitations of our perception, and we are only now, with advancing scientific knowledge, beginning to see what the doctrine of predestination, which is after all there in the New Testament, might actually mean. Sorry this has become so technical, but you see what I'm getting at.

The Christian tradition suggests that at the core of our eternal fate is how we manage to see, or fail to see. In the 'parable of the sheep and the goats' in the 25th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, an image of the final judgement, those to be damned are confronted by their neglectfulness and the fact that they have failed to see the truth:

> And they will also answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to the least of these [my brothers and sisters] you did not do it to me'. And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

The most poignant image of spiritual blindness I know of comes in Dante's treatment of the experience of Hell, the 'Inferno' section of the *Divine Comedy*. In the second circle of the Inferno, Dante meets the lovers, Francesca and Paolo. Francesca, daughter of the Duke of Ravenna, was married off to Giovanni, son of the Lord of Rimini, to secure a peace treaty between the two cities. Francesca and Giovanni's brother Paolo fall in love; Giovanni discovers them and murders them. For many artists and writers, Paolo and Francesca became symbols of the tragic but absolute primacy of love over social convention. For Dante, however, not only have they elevated passion over reason, but they have also, no matter how understandably, violated the bonds that keep society stable and functioning. Nevertheless, the poet sympathises and asks Francesca what initiated their love. When she tells him, in words drenched with hackneyed sentiment, that it was just reading a book about Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere, Dante faints 'from pity' – but it's pity at the lovers' utter inability to understand the damage they have done, and continued self-belief, even when they find themselves in Hell. He faints at the blind audacity of human beings meeting the perfect justice of God.

The Eastern Orthodox tradition has always stressed the importance of this interior blindness in a way that Western Christianity is only now rediscovering. St Basil the Great taught that the Last Judgement – Christ's separation of the righteous and unrighteous – was an experience that would take place in the soul's own heart. The eastern Church Fathers were united in understanding Hell as having been destroyed but that human beings re-create it for ourselves by our deluded choices. Yet even those choices did not mean sinners were lost forever. St Isaac the Syrian and St Gregory of Nyssa believed that Hell was temporary and that everyone would eventually be saved. Archbishop Anthony Bloom decided that universal salvation 'cannot be a certainty of faith … but it can be a certainty of hope since, knowing God as we know him, we have the right to hope for all things'.

Some Christians, though, positively *relish* Hell. At least for other people, people who aren't like them, unbelievers, perverts, sneerers and mockers, the outsiders; or the comfortable and complacent, though that has become rather less common since Christianity took over the Western world (you rarely hear fire-and-brimstone preachers denounce the rich who 'fatten themselves in the day of slaughter' as the Apostle James, supposedly Jesus's brother, puts it in the New Testament). Hell is a way of imagining

your revenge on those who've put you down, persecuted you, or who you suspect are having a better time of life than you are. OK, I may be living a life of self-denial *now*, but the time will come when *you* self-indulgent sinners will be burning and *I'll* be laughing.

There's a film made in 1998 about Jesus returning to earth with the intention of bringing about the Apocalypse on the eve of the Millennium; *The Book of Life*, directed by Hal Hartley. Singer PJ Harvey plays a Gothed-up Mary Magdalene in a simply gorgeous black coat, upbraiding Lucifer in a West Country accent – '*get* your feet *off* o' that bedspread'. In one scene Martin Donovan as Jesus is confronted by a ragged saint on a rooftop demanding that he gets on with destroying Creation so Christians will see their vengeance on the legions of unbelievers: 'how long, Lord, how long?' It's a cry taken straight from the last book of the New Testament, the Revelation of St John, a terrifying vision of the end of the world which has fuelled the imagination of twenty centuries of Christians trying to conceive what the final triumph of God will be like. There is no mistaking in its chapters the sense of exultation as 'Babylon, the great city', which stands for the world and its powers, goes up in flames, and terrible, terrible things befall those who deny Jesus, a cosmic convulsion from which believers emerge into light and glory. Weaving through the early Christian scriptures is a persistent and urgent concern to try and work out who is 'in' and who is 'out', who is 'us' and who is not.

This, I think, is why Christians *want* so badly to believe in sulphur and flames; it justifies who they are, and the position they are in, in the here and now, against others. It's a savage kind of comfort. And it's *not so far* from the kind of delight in the signs and marks of destruction and calamity that lies at the heart of the Gothic sensibility. My LGMG friend Aphra refers to 'the social inadequacy which turns you into a Goth in the first place', and surely the deathliness and destructiveness which weave their way through Gothic aesthetics – for which see chapter 7 - are at least partly about taking revenge on the 'normal' world in the same way that the apocalyptic fantasies of Christians enlist God's help to avenge them on unbelievers.

In the early days I nursed a particularly liturgical fantasy, the *Missa Apocalyptica*. This was a sort of Gothic Mass – before I'd ever heard of the Goth Eucharist at Cambridge or Greenbelt, and perhaps predating them – but focused on the mingled hopes and fears of the End. The images in my

mind span around the 'Kyrie' and 'Dies Irae' from Mozart's *Requiem*; the *Requiem* has quiet and melancholy passages too, but those are among the most terrifying and at the same time exhilarating pieces of music in the Western canon. As the great imaginary black-swathed altar, high up a flight of steps, was laid ready for Communion, I would in my mind prostrate myself in front of it while the 'Kyrie' soared and swooped, and as the music built up to its final climax, the servers would step forward and light two great basins of oil: twin columns of fire would blaze up either side of the altar, and on the final notes of the *'eleison'* a cord would be pulled and a huge cloth would fall behind, black apart from a blood-red cross, ready for the terrors of the 'Dies Irae' to take over. It was when I began picturing the cross replaced by a screaming hell-mouth that I realised the fantasy had gone too far. It had progressed beyond anything the Mass recognisably was towards externalising my own psychology.

This projection of my own dark interior life was not about wishing *particular* people into the Lake of Fire, but it *was* the reflection of a marginal, Gothically-inclined personality expressing itself in liturgy (even if I never got far enough to put it into practice). Yet it seems striking that the more marginal a Christian tradition is, the more it mentions Hell, from the Westboro Baptists in the States to the Society of St Pius V which seems to celebrate nothing other than Requiem Masses, complete with the Dies Irae and black vestments. If you're on the margins, after all, you have a lot of people to want to feel justified against. Here's the great third-century Christian writer Tertullian, marginalised both from the pagan Roman society he was part of and, as a Montanist heretic, the Christian mainstream he came to despise, talking about how much fun it will be to see his enemies cast into Hell:

> At that greatest of all spectacles, that last and eternal judgment, how shall I admire, how laugh, how rejoice, how exult, when I behold so many proud monarchs groaning in the lowest abyss of darkness; so many magistrates liquefying in fiercer flames than they ever kindled against the Christians; so many sage philosophers blushing in red-hot fires with their deluded pupils; so many tragedians more tuneful in the expression of their own sufferings; so many dancers tripping more nimbly from anguish than ever before from applause.

This goes somewhat beyond the rather cool 'joyous contemplation of the justice of God' which was what later thinkers like Thomas Aquinas

admitted the blessed might feel when glimpsing the damned. This is a bit personal, directed at very real people you might have reason not to like.

You mustn't ever have much to *do* with such people, of course. You must certainly not get to know them; you might discover that there is more to them than being one-dimensional embodiments of opposition to you and whatever you believe in. To contemplate with equanimity the everlasting torture of people who are not one-dimensional, but who have histories, relationships, hurts and fears like your own, is more than most human beings have stomach for. It relies on not knowing non-Christians, so that you can safely, happily imagine they are radically different from you, some separate and wicked species. Break down that barrier, and the whole system that rests on assuming the wicked and the righteous, the pious and the unbelieving, are so irretrievably distinct, breaks with it.

The Anglican funeral service tiptoes delicately around the issue of the eternal fate of the person concerned; it asserts the 'sure and certain hope of the resurrection' in ringing but very general terms, if you read carefully; and, when called upon to say a few words on these occasions, so do I most of the time. I do draw some distinctions. If the dead person has been an active Christian I wear a stole of gold-and-black brocade rather than the customary penitential purple and asperse the coffin with water as a reminder of baptism; if they've been part of the 'sacramental system' it seems only right that the sacramental system should embrace them at their life's end, I think. Perhaps I shouldn't make those changes, limited as they are, but it doesn't seem inappropriate to me.

Once I took a funeral for a man whose children hadn't always been on the best of terms with him; he could be 'difficult' on occasions. One of his sons and his (the son's) wife were evangelical Christians and I wondered what they might think regarding the eternal destiny of this man who had never, so far as anyone could identify, made any sort of 'commitment to Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Saviour', as the phrase goes. While I was still wondering, however, they spoke up. 'He may not have known Jesus', said the son, 'but Jesus knows him.' And so, I was supposed to conclude, all was well and heaven awaited. It may indeed be so, but how that pleasing phrase sat with classic evangelical Christian theory I was not and still am not very clear. The truth is that classic Christian theory often cannot stand against the facts of love. If we can forgive someone, it seems impossible to imagine that God won't.

And yet. Perhaps God knows better than us. Metropolitan Anthony insisted that the hope of universal redemption was just that, a *hope*. Christianity can't afford to lose sight of the possibility of loss, of not *everything* making it through – as Jesus himself seems to envisage. Our actions have consequences, for us and for others, in the realm of the spirit and, as a result, in the material realm as well. Gothic, too, insists on the *necessity* of loss, of some things being identified and sealed as negative, as evil.

Years ago the critic Jonathan Meades described Gothic as an architecture 'uniquely conducive to feelings of pious dread', and therefore, he argued mischievously, the only style properly suited to building churches. When I was doing the research for *Exuviae* I came across the long-forgotten early twentieth-century art critic Wilhelm Worringer who had had similar thoughts. He suggested that, although Gothic must have been experienced in the high Middle Ages as an explosion of light into a Europe accustomed to the dim, heavy majesty of Romanesque building, it nevertheless embodied a curious tension in its very form. The Gothic arch soars upwards, bearing with it the Godward aspirations of humankind – and then it comes to a point. It jars, it stops, it can go no further. It is, if you will, a declaration in stone of the beauty of which human beings are capable, aesthetic and, by implication, moral – and of what they are not capable. Beyond the jarring apex of the Gothic arch there is only God. It hints at his presence, but cannot make him visible. All it can make visible is the desire for him – and our distance from him. We endlessly fall short of what we want to be. The pointed arch makes that clear. It is the mark of irreconcilable tension.

Goths *do* tension. And, in matters of faith, tension is right. There *are* losses. Not everything makes it through.

4. Giving Up

The brothers of Atchison Abbey, Kansas, photographed by Gordon Parks in 1955. The renunciation involved in the religious life disturbs natural human acquisitiveness and self-concern. Gothic instinctively understands this, and processes the ambiguities of the religious life in its products.

I didn't exactly row with Carol Siegel, but I did disagree with her when she brought out *Goth's Dark Empire* in 2005 (this seems to be a pattern between me and others who write books about Goth). It's safe to say the book wasn't well-received by Goths generally, at least in the UK (look at the Amazon.co.uk reviews, which are terse and dismissive to say the least), but Dr Siegel had at least (apparently) taken the trouble to get to know some Goths and liked them. Interestingly, when she corresponded with me she claimed to be a Christian and mentioned churches she had worshipped in while attending academic conferences in London.

Dr Siegel saw the young Goths she interviewed and spoke to as representatives of a rebellion against the sexual norms mainstream American society tried to impose on its young people. She very eloquently describes her epiphany regarding the Goth scene one night in Portland, Oregon:

> As I passed over the pedestrian bridge above the freeway, I saw a group of Goths streaming like black smoke down under the freeway overpass. The poetic beauty of this moment, and its mystery – what were they planning to do under the street?- brought to mind, by way of contrast, how as a young woman I used rather obnoxiously to intone lines from … TS Eliot's 'The Waste Land' whenever I found myself among what I saw as the zombie capitalist consumers in San Francisco's financial district … at rush hour … But here in Portland's literally underground Goth movement … were people who designed their appearances, including a generous use of permanent markers like facial piercings and tattoos, to make blending into the mainstream impossible. Yet they also marked themselves as dead … My own youthful sense of self was constructed along lines dictated by my assimilation of the rhetoric of sexual liberation … So it was both exciting and unsettling to me to see the Goths' perversely eroticised embrace of death. Here was a new take on the old sexual revolution. … To me, then, Goths are people who try to do something interesting, and usually something sexually exciting, with that sense of being dead to the straight world.

Dr Siegel's view of Goths as carrying on the sexual revolution of the 1960s which so informed her – blurring gender distinctions, embracing homosexuality and polyamory, playing with the undoing of the human in BDSM – has not always been backed up by other studies. Dunja Brill's 2008 book *Goth Culture: Gender, Sexuality & Style* maintained that Goths had not got quite as far beyond gender distinctions as they liked to think,

but were in fact surprisingly conservative. Mind you, Dr Brill's research was largely based in Britain and Germany, and local Goth scenes vary from city to city, let alone country to country.

Suffice it to say that Dr Siegel's findings are not really mirrored in my experience. I will go out on a limb and say that I find that Goths of my acquaintance are very tolerant of sexual diversity, but not actually *that* diverse. As Dunja Brill found in her research, lesbianism is regarded as rather chic and amusing but male homosexuality is comparatively rare. In line with Goth's privileging of the feminine, chaps who dress in skirts and fishnets are not uncommon, girls who adopt male gear far less so. The overlap between the Goth and Fetish worlds is largely a function of both being 'safe' spaces for the other, rather than lots of Goths actually being into BDSM. Promiscuity is not necessarily privileged and some of my friends are happy to describe themselves as 'prudes'. Heterosexual romance and monogamy is still normative, and Goths pursue exclusive relationships and enjoy planning their weddings in just the same way as straights do, perhaps even more so (Goth literature and imagery is overwhelmingly romantic with a small and a large 'R'). A Goth friend described himself on Facebook as an

> anti-evangelist … He tried God and clean living but it left him with a hole in his heart, so he switched to booze, drugs and kinky sex and feels much the better for it

… which is too witty for me to dislike, but, despite the pose, the gentleman concerned and his partner (who post-dates the above statement) form a particularly uxorious couple. And Sophie Lancaster and her boyfriend Rob Maltby were a devoted couple who, but for the piercings and lack of a marriage certificate, could have featured in conservative propaganda for exclusive heterosexual bonding; their story, up to her murder, was a modern fairytale romance – that was certainly how it came across in Simon Armitage's poetic meditation on Sophie's death, *Black Roses*, broadcast on Radio 4 in 2011. After the terrible events in Stubbylee Park Rob Maltby commented on his feelings of guilt at not being able to 'protect' Sophie as a man should do.

All that said, Carol Siegel is right to point out that Goths are *comfortable* with S&M imagery even if they may not take it any further than images. We've already mentioned Club Antichrist in Vauxhall which has a strong fetish element no matter what the particular dressing-up theme happens to

be selected for that month, and if you're averse to bare flesh and latex you oughtn't to go. Most Goths are gentler in their exploration or exploitation of transgressive desire, but even the most covered-up Victorian stylist is fetishising themselves: what about all those corsets, heels, elaborate hairdos? In a sense, Goths of either sex can dress in a way that hints at the possibility of erotic danger for the other. An ex-girlfriend told me that her instant thought on meeting me for the first time, arrayed in not-very-bondage-heavy Victorian frock coat and weskit, was to imagine me as a vampire – that is, she translated my appearance into thoughts of excitement and threat (while I was aiming at nothing more threatening than being smart). Playing with the imagery of pain can lead to playing with real pain, and perhaps even beyond, as the 1990s novels of Poppy Z Brite fantasise. Carol Siegel judges that Ms Brite's use of the S&M imagery of Goth in her books 'prepared her readers to understand such theatrical set-piece torture scenes as Tran's death [in *Exquisite Corpse*] as a dramatization not of brutal sex murder so much as of the sometimes frightening erotic technologies of rebirth into a realm beyond gender'. Well, what a relief. By the way Ms Brite *was* a woman then so such I still call her; matters are less clear these days.

More cautious Christians might be tempted to recall at this point the infamous words of St Paul in his Letter to the early church in Rome. You may recognise this as one of the proof-texts usually dragged into the argument about Christian attitudes to homosexuality, but it can have a wider significance too:

> Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator … Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men … were consumed with passion for one another. … They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practise such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practise them.

Sexual deviancy leads to spiritual degradation, then. There is (how could there not be) a certain amount of *debate* about this passage. Is St Paul actually caricaturing the attitudes of his audience – Jewish Christians who imagine this is what Gentiles are all like – rather than expressing what he thinks himself? It *is* so extreme that you might be tempted to think so. If that's the case, he might sympathise when I say that it isn't what I find. Aphra, for instance, was one of my favourite people in the LGMG. Very intelligent and thoughtful, basically orientated towards girls but who had had sexual relationships with men in the past and who mixed with transgendered and homosexual people as well as straight; a regular at Antichrist who played frequently with S&M imagery. She was passionate about justice for sexual minorities. Yet there was a basic gentleness and concern about her, as well as an affection for the Christian culture of her childhood and a recognition of what is good in the Christian faith which was affirming to someone like me. She even remained very close to her mum. Aphra demonstrates that sexual ab-normality, even coupled with the deathliness of Goth, is not at odds with love.

Still, it may be legitimate to ask where transgressive sexuality *goes*; not to the kind of degradation St Paul depicts, surely, but if not there, where? Once genders have been questioned, boundaries crossed and the human undone, what then? I used to have a sadomasochistic trait in my fantasy life – not that I ever did anything about it – but with age that's completely vanished, leaving behind it only the slight frisson that comes with the perverse beauty of Gothic imagery.

The question is raised because, for most of us, the sexual side of ourselves does, eventually, wane and perhaps disappear. As my fifth decade gallops past me it sometimes seems that this is an idea the modern world seems unwilling to face. There was a TV show I saw part of – it must have been some years ago since I abandoned my TV set in 2003 – about sexual attitudes and experiences, the sort of tittilating fodder Channels 4 & 5 put on with a spurious educational justification. An older couple, aged 70 or so perhaps, were standing naked in front of an audience of young people while a middle-aged sexologist questioned them about their sex lives. Suddenly, she stopped as if a thought had hit her and barked at them, 'I *hope* you're still having sex', implying that the idea of anyone not engaging in sexual activity was somehow deviant and immoral, letting the side down. I don't recall any clear answer. The really radical response, I couldn't help feeling, would have been for the gentleman to reply,

'Actually, no, I can't it up since my prostate op and we lost interest years ago anyway. There's so much gardening to do'. It would have upset the presenter so very much.

Diana Athill's lovely memoir of growing old, *Somewhere Towards the End*, written in 2008 when she had turned 90, faces this with rare frankness. Ms Athill hadn't exactly lived a life bereft of sexual adventure before being suddenly, in her early sixties, surprised by her final sexual relationship after a long period of inactivity. Her last man friend was Charles, also in his sixties, with whom sex was comfortable, comforting and matter-of-fact. But when the relationship was over, Ms Athill 'said goodbye to myself as a sexual being'. She doesn't appear to have had any sense of regret or loss and, given she is so honest about everything else, I don't feel inclined to disbelieve her. It was simply something that had come to a natural and fitting end and she describes it in the same manner as giving up driving (which has another chapter to itself in the book) or any other activity which someone of advancing years might have to relinquish. In fact to me, surrendering the prospect of sex for the ability to carry on driving as long as I wanted would seem a completely fair bargain. Artist and actress Molly Parkin once recalled a conversation she'd had with the great jazzman George Melly about the loss of sexual desire after what for both of them had been a lifetime of hardly resisting it: 'Like being unchained from a lunatic', they agreed, pinching a line from Sophocles.

I am an unmarried priest and therefore enjoined to live a celibate life; what sexuality I have has to be confined to my head. But even that has its limits: I've discovered that too much erotic dreaming can interfere with my ability to pray, as though it clogs the mental receptors that tune in to God. As that's what I exist for as a priest, I simply can't afford to let my fantasies run away with me, even though of course I still have desires and weaknesses. I notice two other things. Firstly, my libido has declined as I've got older; that may be purely a matter of age, but the fact that I no longer stoke it with fantasy as much has an effect, as it's finally sunk in that what I really want is not sex as such, but a relationship that might include a sexual side. My libido can vanish for ages, and then suddenly and surprisingly re-emerge just when I think it might be gone forever, a bit like a stream running through a limestone landscape, dipping underground and then popping up again. I'm not sure quite what I feel about this. On the one hand I spent years intermittently feeling desire was very burdensome; but at least it reminds me I'm alive. I face life without

lust as an unfamiliar and strangely fascinating world. The second point is that, having reduced the background noise of desire, I realise that it was often masking emotional needs and difficulties that suddenly emerge with far more clarity and force, and that can be rather unsettling.

As I observe my hair thinning (apart from where I don't want hair), my skin coarsening and my flesh succumbing to gravity, and speculate which bit of me will go wrong first, I think more about the lessons age can teach the young. My scepticism about the depiction of Goths as uniform sexual radicals could simply be down to the fact that, having entered the Goth world rather late, I tend to mix with people who are in their late '20s onward (sometimes a long way onward). These more mature Goths tend to have found satisfying long-term relationships, or, even if they have emerged, as some have, from broken marriages or partnerships and don't want to repeat the experience, they're still not going to prioritise casual sex over finding someone who means something to them. Perhaps it was less important that Carol Siegel's informants were Goth, than that they were simply Young.

Age is not some kind of aberration in lives normatively defined by youth; it's real, it has its own legitimacy. For most people it brings all sorts of compromises and conformities, not just in their sexual lives. Some can kid themselves that they are outside the mainstream world that in their teens, perhaps, they affected to despise: academics, artists, perhaps even clergy who after all aren't really paid and don't really work (in any normal sense). Everyone else has to face the truth about earning a living. So far as I know, the only writer who has thought about what this might mean for Goths is Jillian Venters. Her 2009 book *Gothic Charm School* is a manifesto for the polar opposite of Carol Siegel's insights. Mrs Venters presents Goths as ambassadors for manners, elegance and politeness in a society which has abandoned the very ideas, and confronts how one might go about being Gothic in the workplace, in family contexts, in everyday life. It's all terribly bourgeois – yet, in an age of barbarism, challenging. To crook one's little finger below a cup of tea becomes a revolutionary act.

This is a theme in the current fashion for vintage styles which has had its effect among Goths including young ones. I think of Ivan, the young lawyer whose outfits ranged from velvet smoking jackets to coachman's coats to Wartime khaki uniform and who frequented that strange and beguiling annual event, The Chap Olympiad, organised, as we know, by

the 'journal for the modern gentleman', *The Chap*. Ivan regularly fulminated about the decline in manners and common decency he saw around him. To immerse yourself in the styles of a bygone time, whether you Gothicise them or not, is to announce yourself as uncomfortable with the way the modern world goes about things. My friend Cylene saw her 'Gothic 1950s housewife' style as a very deliberate choice *not* to follow the 'feminist' model of work and independence, and attracted some hostility as a result. For at least some vintage-enthusiastic Goths, the individualism of Goth culture means the freedom to exercise *conservative* options.

For all the emphasis Christians have placed on sexual matters, of course the Bible says very little about them as such. When I speak to wedding couples I point them towards the bit of Genesis that mentions God giving Adam and Eve to one another – 'and for this reason a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and the two of them become one flesh' – and that's about as developed as it gets. The Levitical morality code condemns various sexual deviations; but in the next breath it has a go at people who eat shellfish, or wear two fabrics woven together. St Paul throws out condemnations of sets of sinful people, but there's no consensus as to what his Greek terms actually mean, or how they relate to a modern context. This makes conservative Christian talk about sex *sound* tough, but renders it curiously baseless. The most you can say is that the Christian tradition privileges life-long heterosexual relationships, and from those relationships, alone of all possible human interactions, has it chosen to make a sacrament, a ritual revelation of God's purposes, and call it 'marriage'. What is actually going on in this is less than clear. A priest I knew once suggested that 'the part of our mind that responds sexually is close to the part that responds to God', and though that sounds waffly, I suspect there is something going on here which the Church itself doesn't understand, and won't do for centuries, perhaps. It would be better if it admitted that it doesn't understand. It may be on to something, but doesn't rightly know what, or why.

The truth lies in experience, like that, for instance, of the thirteenth-century mystic St Catherine of Siena as reported by Michael de la Bedoyere in his biography of her:

> Catherine during this period suffered from a form of temptation common among ascetics … in the form of a vision of hateful half-clothed creatures, male and female, flying around her with obscene

> gestures and invitations, until they drove her from her room and she fled to the church. Even there they attacked her, until in answer to her desperate prayer Our Lord appeared to console her …
>
> This phenomenon is always … explained [by suggesting] that the constant repression of normal sexual instincts ends by causing the mind to become a foul sink of beastly thoughts. The inference … is that it would have been much healthier and cleaner to have given way to the original instincts … [Yet it is not] to be wondered that many men and women who for reasons good and sufficient to them repress a normal and powerful bodily instinct, should be faced with a keen struggle which in the vast majority of cases they win and, as it were, grow out of.

The (in its technical meaning) *religious* life – the life of the monk or nun – is the most obvious form of the renounced life, the existence devoted to giving up. In the Gothic imagination convents are hotbeds of pullulating, repressed sexuality, just the attitude Mr de la Bedoyere complains about. Nuns in particular are fetishised figures in Gothic, clichéd icons of the conflict between repression and indulgence which outsiders imagine must occupy much of their thinking (strangely, considering how crucial Matthew Lewis's 1797 novel *The Monk* was in framing that Gothic imagination, monks feature almost not at all nowadays, whereas sexy nuns pop up all the time).

Real nuns, as far as I've ever encountered, have their issues, but though sexuality is surely *there*, it tends to be a very minor element among all the other problems and tensions of trying to live a rather intensely communal life. 'Never live in a community of women', one former nun advised me, as though I might ever have considered doing so. When Karen Armstrong left her Roman Catholic convent in 1967, an experience she wrote up in her book *Through the Narrow Gate* (1997), the occasion was indeed her rejection of 'the discipline' – self-chastisement with a whip of knotted cords – but she recognised that the main business of the nun's life in this pre-reform convent was not repressing sex but repressing self-will; it was *that* she couldn't manage.

I first encountered the reality of 'the renounced life' via the Anglican Benedictine convent of West Malling Abbey in Kent. The Sisters at Malling occupy the remains of the medieval nunnery on the site (along with a colossal Victorian manor house within the enclosure which visitors don't see) and remain one of the most traditionalist orders in the Church

of England; in fact they could give some of the more conservative Roman Catholic communities a run for their money – full black-and-white (though not all the Sisters opt to wear the old-fashioned starched wimple, some do) and the sevenfold sung Office everyday, plus Mass. Enclosure is serious, though not as strict as it once was, and while visitors can chat to the Guest Sister the others are fleeting, shadowy presences at most. As I say, the community doubtless has its issues which don't necessarily come to the surface; the Guest Sister when I first started going simply wasn't there one year, and I've never discovered exactly what happened to her ('she's gone away', was all I ever heard – gone away? nuns don't 'go away'). But what impresses nevertheless is the peace of the Abbey. Of course it is physically *quiet*, but more deeply the peace comes from the sense of stability: the stability of the place itself, and the way it revolves around the changeless structure of worship in the church.

What the Sisters at West Malling have done is to exchange the *extensive* relationships the rest of us cultivate in favour of *intensive* ones. *We* gather an ever-extending range of friends via Facebook and socialising, and those of us who are so inclined generate more people to have relationships with through parenthood. The Holy Sisters, on the other hand, have chosen to restrict their relationships to one tiny group of people who they can never escape, never get away from, never gripe about to anyone outside, without leaving the community completely. *We* delight in scooting to exotic locations across the world, taking endless photos and whacking them up onto Flickr for everyone to admire. The Sisters have chosen to stay in one place, knowing it down to its blades of grass, observing its passing moods and seasons as they do those of one another. The truth is that you can't have this intense kind of relationship without giving up others. All the rest of us can do, unless we join it, is glimpse it from a distance and try to perceive its value.

I'm not required to make that level of renunciation. Still, as a priest I am 'liminal', living mostly in the world yet pointing to something beyond it, and sometimes I do wonder whether I am not more worldly than I ought to be. Involvement with the Goth world brings a certain amount of glamour and beauty into my life, and going up to London to meet my friends always carries a shiver of excitement, however tiny. I enjoy being with people who talk very seriously about frivolous things, especially clothes. 'That's a very fine waistcoat', I said to Sylvester the other day. 'Yes, it's from a new tailor I've collected', he said and gave me her card. 'A

handmade waistcoat for rather less than an off-the-peg one from Darkangel I consider pretty good value.' For fun, I decided to record my attire for one New Year's Eve with the LGMG:

> Boots, black leather by Oliver Sweeney, gift passed on by friends
> Socks, Australian National Geographic 'red spider' socks, present
> Suit, black wool by De Havilland, from Moss Bros Guildford
> Shirt, white collarless cotton by Frederick Theak, from Jolliffe & Sons, Marlow
> Collar, white cotton by Gieves & Sons (1930s?), came with box of collars bought via eBay
> Waistcoat, black with silver urns, cotton-viscose by Piscador, from Old Hat, Fulham
> Tie, black floral, polyester by Primark (!), from charity shop in Teddington
> Tie pin, silver moon-face from an antique shop in Brighton
> Cufflinks, silver coffins by Stuart Silverware, via eBay
> Overcoat, black wool by and from Harvie & Hudson, Jermyn Street
> Scarf, black wool by and from Marks & Spencer, Bournemouth (present)
> Hat, black wool felt fedora, from Mad Hatters, Brighton (maker not certain)

The trouble is that I have to fight very hard not to keep assessing the sartorial standards of the people around me. I stand in the queue at the Co-Op back home and automatically consider the young woman in front: That jacket is interesting, but it's a bit short. Your trousers make your legs look thin and you'd be better off with flatter-heeled shoes … and so on. Men usually dress so badly it's not even worth considering them. But this is a deeply suspect habit that can seduce me to thinking badly of people whose lives and experiences and thoughts I know absolutely nothing about. I think about Karen Armstrong's experience of London when she left the convent in 1965 to study:

> Only a day later [from her veiling] I found myself in a different world. Deafened by the din, I stumbled through the London Underground. Everywhere people seemed to be pushing … No one stood back to let others go first with the self-effacement that I had grown used to. People swore impatiently as they struggled through the turnstiles. On the escalators I couldn't believe the advertisements – bodies, nearly naked …pictures of long cool drinks whose brand names I had quite forgotten.

> And all around people's faces were set in hard, strained masks … No, I thought, this is not my world. I don't belong here anymore.

Which world am I more part of, and what might I have to surrender to keep in touch with the One my true life comes from?

Yet everyone gives up something. The life of frenetic activity, or of indolent idleness, surrenders some things in favour of others. The City business type abandons rest and perhaps relationships-in-depth in return for the money which will buy her luxury in the future; the drug addict hands over achievement and comfort for the high – at least at first. You select your own renunciations; perhaps not always consciously, and maybe later to repent them.

Black is the sign of renunciation, that not everything can be reconciled, not everything makes it through. It is not for nothing that monks, nuns and priests in the oldest Christian traditions adopt this colour, or absence of colour:

> I never, never like to see
> A clergyman in black.
> It speaks of dark disloyalty,
> And clandestine attack;
> Of sabotage, conspiracy,
> And stabbings in the back.
>
> Though ministers are difficult
> To sift and classify
> I find the deeds of darkness
> In the men of deepest dye;
> And those in black are normally
> So very, very High.
>
> Although I do not *like* High Church
> I'd stomach one or two
> (The Church of England's big enough
> To tolerate a few).
> If only they would not behave
> As if their faith were *true*. ('A Clergyman in Black', S.J.Forest)

So do Goths, of course. Not all Goths attire themselves only in black, but black links the glamour and beauty of Gothic to the insistence of the Christian tradition on continual surrender, on allegiance to something beyond the worldly, in a delightfully ambiguous tension.

You need to be careful to give up the right things. 'Too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart', said WB Yeats, and that calls another (religious) poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, to mind. It seems clear from his papers that Hopkins was remarkably unperturbed, as such, by the knowledge of his homosexuality. He accepted (especially having become a Roman Catholic priest) that he would never be able either to cure it or express it, and never castigated himself, questioned his nature, or complained. It was just a fact. Clearly he poured a lot of his imagination and sexual energy into his poetry, some of the most remarkable verse of the 19th century. But then he decided that the life of the Jesuit priest demanded that he renounce so worldly and frivolous a thing as poetry. The decision was not only a loss to the world of literature, it deformed and cramped Hopkins's soul. His priestly ministry largely failed, and by the time he died at only 45 he was in a profoundly depressed state, bitter, self-absorbed, and unkind. I suspect that had he kept writing he would at least have been happier, and probably a more successful priest. It was a bad call.

Mark Frank was a High-Church Anglican clergyman of the 17th century, thrown out of Cambridge University during the Commonwealth and later becoming the Master of Pembroke College after the King returned. This is part of one of his sermons.

> Sometimes we seek Christ in the grave; that is, in fading, dying things, in earthly comforts; but he is not there.
>
> Sometimes we seek him in the graves of sins and lusts, and continue in them; but his body is not in the graves of lust. He is not there.
>
> Sometimes we seek him in a melancholy fit … all godly of a sudden. We have buried a wife or son or brother; we are disappointed … and now forsooth we are seeking Christ; but he is not here.
>
> Sometimes we seek him in outward elements, in mere ceremonies and formalities, and mind no further.
>
> You see why it is when we seek Christ we often miss him. We seek him where he is not to be found – amidst graves and sepulchres – whilst we are dead in our trespasses and sins. Learn there how to lie down in death, and how to rise again; to die with Christ and to rise with him.

How much of what we do, Christians and unbelievers alike, is 'seeking Christ where he is not to be found'. We are a long time learning about life, about the deaths we must die in order to live to what really matters.

5. You're All Individuals

Variations on a theme: outsiders often mock Goths for harping on the ideals of individualism while all dressing the same. In fact there is considerably more variety than a display of black leather coats on a wet Goth Walk around London in 2010 would suggest!

Jewish Cuban-American Goth comedian-musician Voltaire explains how his act started in his amusing little tome *What Is Goth*:

> I positioned myself on the stage before a group of fifty or so pasty-faced, dour-looking Goths. My set began with the songs 'Ex-Lover's Lover' and 'When You're Evil'. I told my absurd little anecdotes in the interims and went on to play the tongue-in-cheek murder ballads that I'd written. As the show progressed I could see a look of confusion on some of the audience members' faces as it dawned on them, 'Hey, wait a minute … this stuff is funny?' I watched a smile begin to snake its way across the face of a girl in the front row as she bowed her head and then covered her mouth with her hand. 'Must … not … smile …'

When he started out attending Goth events in New York in the mid- '90s, Voltaire found 'Goth had a very limited and strict definition, which included wearing black all of the time, dressing in 18th- or 19th-century garb, being misanthropic, and never ever (under penalty of complete ostracism) smiling'. On the few occasions Goth manages to come onto the radar of the non-Goth public its image isn't exactly positive, and if this is how *insiders* satirise its little foibles that would seem to make some sense. Again, in 1995 cartoonist Jhonen Vasquez produced a comic strip *Johnny the Homicidal Maniac* including a lovely mickey-take of the Goths he'd encountered, 'Anne Gwish', a character whose customary mode of entertainment was to sit drinking with friends and moaning about whoever infringed in the slightest way her own ridiculous codes of Gothically-acceptable behaviour and dress. It's difficult to see why anyone would actually want to be involved in this kind of culture, and it's not what I've encountered at all, but people have told me that such things do take place.

Goths themselves tend to be highly aware of the 'conformist individuality' which characterises the scene. Even so, while Goth style tends to be 'variations on a theme', that theme has been growing more diffuse for years. So far as mere appearance is concerned, there was perhaps a time when the repertoire of Goth style was indeed constrained and restricted. This is what Voltaire discovered when he tiptoed into the New York Goth clubs in the early '90s to find that nothing had changed over the previous ten years or more, and everyone still looked like Siouxsie Sioux or Johnny Slut. Since then, though, Goths have diversified musically and stylistically to the point where it becomes difficult to see what all the strange, strange creatures you might encounter in a Goth club actually have in common

with one another; it isn't even black any more. Classifying one another is of perennial fascination to modern Goths. Megan Balanck from Bristol came up with no fewer than 23 'Goth Stereotypes' for her website blackwaterfall.com, each with male and female variants – and there's quite a bit of colour among them. Perkygoths, Mopeygoths, Victorian Goths, Steampunks and Burlesque, *et cetera et cetera*. To make matters even more complicated, individuals have a habit of not sticking to one style. Janet from the LGMG, notorious for the kaleidoscopic variety of schmutter she was capable of wearing, once turned up to a history walk with the group in full Edwardian riding gear with a little top hat, frilly white blouse and a cameo brooch. She left early as it was club night and obviously that required changing: club gear, for that occasion anyway, was New-rock boots* and a silver lamé catsuit. Presumably she'd been wearing a third outfit earlier in the day too!

Music is no easier to keep track of. Jake, programmer, industrial-metal music enthusiast and occasional DJ, was proud of his website where he'd exhaustively catalogued over forty sub-genres of Goth music and was telling me about it at some length one evening. I was very cheeky and asked whether he'd included Swingpunk. His smile froze slightly. 'Swingpunk? What's Swingpunk?' In fact at the time only neo-revivalists The Puppini Sisters were referring to their music as Swingpunk – a swing-influenced but unmistakably modern pop format often using samples of '20s, '30s and '40s tracks – and apart from the common interest in vintage style there was nothing Gothic about them, or stylemates such as Imelda May and Caro Emerald. However Marcella Puppini has a far more Gothy cabaret project called Marcella and the Forget-Me-Nots; and within a year, curiously enough, Electro-Swing was making its appearance at London Goth clubs. Uncanny. The continual cross-fertilisation of genres, styles and ideas within the Goth world means nothing stands still anymore.

In what I think is still the most insightful book on the Gothic tradition – *Gothic: Four Hundred Years of Excess, Horror, Evil & Ruin* – Richard Davenport-Hines emphasises the role of pretence and burlesque in Gothic, including modern Goths:

> Goths [by which Davenport-Hines means producers of Gothic culture] reject the bourgeois sense of human identity as a serious business, stable, abiding and continuous, requiring the assertion of one true cohesive inner self as proof of health and good citizenry. Instead Goths

> celebrate human identity as an improvised performance, discontinuous and incessantly re-devised by stylised acts … Goths believe in mistrust. … [quoting Goya] the world is a masquerade; face, dress, voice, everything is feigned.

18th-century wit Horace Walpole once greeted a group of French visitors to his Gothic house, Strawberry Hill, wearing Charles I's huge embroidered gloves and a wooden cravat (a *wooden cravat!)* carved by Grinling Gibbons, and took mischievous delight in the fact that the Gallic party went away convinced that this was the customary dress of the English country gentleman. Lord Byron, sojourning in Venice, wrote to a friend 'I am about to go out in my cape and gondola – there's two nice Mrs Radcliffe words for you!' Byron was poking fun at the fact he very well knew, that his lifestyle made him appear like a threatening anti-hero of one of Anne Radcliffe's Gothic novels, even without him deliberately planning it: after all, you can't get around in Venice without a gondola.

In his song 'The Vampire Club' Voltaire points out the terrible results of someone committing the social *faux-pas* of referring, in a club setting no less, to a would-be vampiric Goth by their real name – 'Hey everybody, see the fool in the cape/His name is Bernie Weinstein and he's in the eighth grade!' – and in *What is Goth?* he provides a helpful Gothic Name Generator which produces such delightful pseudonyms as 'Marquesa Maleficent, Seductress of the Black Veil'. Nobody I know has gone in for anything as camply baroque as that, but plenty of Goths adopt names for use in the scene which may or may not bear some tangential relation to their birth name, but which do express something of the fantasy role-playing which is at the centre of Goth itself. Sometimes it takes a while to work out what somebody is *actually* called. My friend Cylene was Miss Nostalgia when she was modelling and performing, is Zoe Monday as an artist, and went by a third name on the LGMG. I once made the astonishing discovery that a LGMG friend worked with one of my parishioners, and very incautiously blurted out her Goth name to him (thankfully no security was breached). Other name-choosing is about asserting a different identity from the one nature and family may have lumbered you with. One friend ditched her birth name at 16 and became Phoebe, 'a Greek goddess with beautiful butterfly wings'. Years ago I chose 'weepingcross.com' as my website address, and that has almost accidentally turned me into Father Weepingcross, which does link the Gothic and Christian bits of my life. If you attend Club Antichrist you have the

chance of a session in their photobooth, dressed according to whatever the theme of the evening is, another form of play-acting.

So Goths dress up, and know they're dressing up. But there's a contradiction here. If Goths know they're faking it, what of their own statements, as we saw in chapter 2, that what they tend to value most in the Goth scene is 'the chance to be yourself'?

This ambiguity emerges particularly acutely in some settings. I've only once been to the twice-yearly Goth festival at Whitby, and on my day walking around the town was often unpleasantly surprised by how badly people were dressed. They were dolled up in Goth gear, frock coats and pirate hats bought off-the-peg in Camden or from online Goth retailers, but there was a sort of inappropriateness, of people obviously not being aware what looked good. We reflected on this back in the cottage where we were staying. For many Whitby festival-goers, it's the only context in which they have a chance to express that side of themselves, and Goth attire becomes *costume* rather than *clothing*. My friends recalled being there a couple of years before and meeting a bearded man wearing a white wedding dress; the Goth Weekend, he said, was the only time he felt he could do so and get away with it, which is rather moving in its way. We liked to distinguish our more thoughtful, carefully-assembled styles from those of 'weekend Goths'. But what did this say about us and them? Who was authentic and who was fake?

Once again, I wonder whether age doesn't play a part here. When people move into the Goth scene, it does indeed typically come as a liberation, as an arena where they can express part of themselves which hitherto has been repressed or unsuspected. 'I'm tired of trying to deny who I am', commented young Christian Goth Harriet when she first signed up to the LGMG. It makes sense for younger Goths to put a high value on authenticity and self-expression. Even older Goths, when actually *asked* why they're involved in the Goth world, will remember the reasons why it was attractive to them when they started and quote those too. But fairly soon this question necessarily arises: If I 'express myself' through the way I look, the music I listen to, the books I read and the people I associate with, who am *I*? Where is the 'I' which is being expressed, apart from these superficial things? If people treat me differently because of them, if I feel differently about myself because of them, do *I* change if *they* change? If I graduate from Tradgoth* to Steampunk and start wearing cogs, goggles

and brown leather and listening to Abney Park, is it an expression of the same self as before, or is the self changing? Is it, in fact, changed *by* what I'm wearing, what I'm doing? Older Goths may not ask this question very explicitly –in fact I'd be astonished if they did – but by the nature of things they've had to make compromises between style and everyday living, have acquired non-Goth friends, and are experienced enough to know that the virtues of toleration and creativity are not solely to be found within the pale of the Goth community. Growing up as a Goth is a bit like growing up as a Christian – you realise that there isn't really as much as you thought dividing you from the majority outside. An awareness of artifice displaces, to some extent, the ideology of authenticity.

But the demand for authenticity still afflicts us. I went to see a depressed middle-aged parishioner and didn't take long to come to the conclusion that she was the kind of person who had always taken responsibility in her working and personal life, and then for a variety of reasons had had all those markers of identity removed very quickly without having built up anything else. What she was going through was, to an extent, an identity crisis. In the course of our talk she complained: 'People always used to advise me to 'be myself', and I'd think, What the hell does that *mean*?' It's a shorthand we'll examine more later, but *as* a shorthand it tells you very little. Authenticity is especially prized in some fields of endeavour, especially popular music:

> Isn't Laura Marling great, but bloody hell, she should be great, because she's been brought up in a fantastic home with intelligent artistic parents, great education, lots of music lessons … [Music is to me] About struggle, truthfulness, authenticness …

… one-time punk star Viv Albertine told the audience of Radio 4's *The Music Group* in 2011, denouncing the vapidity of middle-class pop artistes singing about superficial irrelevancies. The programme stuck in my mind because not just Ms Albertine but the other participants too were very keen on musicians playing 'real instruments' and 'singing their own songs' rather than stuff written by others. This has always seemed a very strange approbation to me: did anyone ever expect Maria Callas to write her own material, rather than leaving it to Rossini and Puccini? Nevertheless, there is still a strain in us which desires pop music to communicate some kind of 'real experience' and for the people who make it to be familiar with that

experience, to know what they're talking about. The great PJ Harvey complained:

> The tortured artist myth is rampant. People paint me as some kind of black witchcraft-practising devil from hell, that I have to be twisted and dark to do what I am doing. It's a load of rubbish. … Some critics have taken my writing so literally to the point that they'll listen to 'Down by the Water' and believe I have actually given birth to a child and drowned her.

Because it developed out of a music scene, Goth has that expectation buried in its psyche too; but because it's linked to something bigger, the Gothic tradition as a whole, it has to come to terms with its own obvious theatricality and fakery.

When I was at university and trying to think philosophically, I spent a long, long while analysing my behaviour and ways of thinking. I suppose I wanted to discover who I was, settle my sense of identity and come to terms with it. What I discovered was that I didn't seem to *have* any stable identity; every conclusion I arrived at came with contradictions and qualifications, and if I said I was *like* any one thing I could instantly think of exceptions. 'I' was simply a collection of perceptions, memories, physical processes, and learned responses; none of that was stable, all of it was as shifting as sand. There was, radically, nothing there.

In Douglas Adams's *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* the travellers meet the Man Who Rules the Universe, an abstract philosopher who lives in a rain-battered shack on an obscure planet with his cat, and they ask his name. 'I don't know,' he replies. 'Why, do you think I ought to have one? It seems odd to give a bundle of vague sensory perceptions a name'. I'd also peeled back the layers of my personality and found nothing underneath. If I had an identity, it came from outside me, from the things I was committed to and did, not from anything inside. It was a conclusion that was strangely liberating, and since then I've always (sometimes to a rather exaggerated degree) scoffed at the notions of individuality and creativity that are so cherished by the modern world. In my more mischievous moods I claim not to believe in either of them.

Some of the letters in the New Testament don't seem to have been written by the person whose name they bear (some scholars would argue very few of them were). Whereas in those very early days of Christianity there was

next to nothing in the way of structure and authority, and the authentic voice of, say, St Paul is one of anxiety and fear lest the little Christian communities he has founded go astray, some of the texts seem to be written from a far more secure position, denouncing those who have wandered from the true path. The Second Letter of Peter is rather like that, but it contains a line which struck me like thunder when I first noticed it, whenever that was. In chapter 2, verse 19, Peter, or whoever is writing under his name, says something that sounds blindingly obvious, if not tautological: 'a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him'. Well, of course he is, you might think, but wait: what the Apostle, if it's him, is saying is, we're all slaves to *something*. Freedom consists in choosing your master, because having made the choice, you will be changed by it. Going back to what we were saying in chapter 2, autonomy is something of a chimera, and the more you examine your own actions, the more you realise you're not *immediately* in control of them; rather, they emerge out of the sort of person you've become over time, and *that's* been shaped by the things you have done and what you've committed yourself to.

It was typical of WH Auden's counterintuitive dryness when he wrote in *The Age of Anxiety* in 1947:

> Only animals who are below civilisation and the angels who are beyond it can be sincere. Human beings are, necessarily, actors who cannot become something before they first pretended to be it; and they can be divided, not into the hypocritical and the sincere, but into the sane who know they are acting and the mad who do not.

Recognising that you must work at an identity and not simply discover it within, anti-romantic insight that it is, is a sign of grown-up thinking. To *act* isn't always a frivolous matter; not if what you are acting *at* is something you truly want to be.

Some of the anger directed at Goths seems to relate to the idea that Goths won't grow up. Grown-up people, after all, don't tend to make a priority of spending money on clothes and wearing them about – and inventing *occasions* to wear them – unless they have incomes significantly higher than average, which isn't true of most Goths. It *is* true that Goths tend to reproduce rather less than non-Goths, notwithstanding the ranges of Goth gear for babes and toddlers sold by some of the clothing retailers; most of the Goths I know in their 30s and 40s are childless, so if not having children is an indicator of arrested adolescence, they'd have to plead guilty

(however I suspect that in many cases their childless state is almost certainly the right decision).

But I suspect that the deepest wellspring of the ire and suspicion often directed towards the black-clad is the perception that they think they are *superior*, that they take themselves and their foibles colossally seriously. As I've suggested, there is some truth to this, especially as regards young Goths who may have had to struggle against enormous condescension and opposition to do what they want to do and look the way they want to look. It's not surprising if, as a defence mechanism, such sullen new-entry Goths end up ranting at the 'norms' or 'mundanes' (horrid words but ones you occasionally hear) against whom they've had to define themselves. But most acquire perfectly normal status and security through the world of work and other forms of expression and relax a bit. They come to recognise, and even relish, the pretence which is the core of acting Gothic; after all, one well-known Goth band glories in the name Pretentious, Moi? It's a hoot, this business of being miserable.

Christianity, at least Christian worship, can also be seen as having this dual aspect of frivolity and serious intent. Romano Guardini wrote in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*:

> The liturgy … , with endless care, with all the seriousness of the child and the strict consciousness of the great artist, has toiled to express [play] in a thousand forms so that the soul may therein have its existence and live its life. The liturgy has laid down the serious rules of the sacred game which the soul plays before God. … Only those who are not scandalized by this understand what the liturgy means. From the very first every type of rationalism has turned against it. The practice of the liturgy means that by the help of grace, under the guidance of the church, we grow into living works of art before God, with no other aim or purpose than that of living and existing in his sight; it means foregoing maturity with all its purposefulness, and confining oneself to play … It may, of course, happen that those extremely clever people, who merely by being grown up have lost all spiritual youth and spontaneity, will misunderstand this and give at it. It is in this very aspect of the liturgy that its didactic aim is to be found — that of teaching the soul not to see purposes everywhere, not to be too conscious of the end it wishes to attain, not to be desirous of being over-clever and grown-up, but to understand simplicity in life. The soul must learn to abandon, at least in prayer, the restlessness of purposeful

> activity; it must learn to waste time for the sake of God … It must learn not to be continually yearning to do something, to attack something, to accomplish something useful, but to play the divinely ordained game of the liturgy in liberty and beauty and holy joy before God.

Christian worship, argues Guardini, is terribly important because it tells us who we are, but directed as it is towards God it bears no relationship to the world of conscious human effort and busyness and is in that sense purposeless and playful. I'm not sure many *Christians* will grasp that, let alone anyone else; and if you've spent any time worshipping in church you may blink in disbelief. It's a bold statement, especially considering it was made by a Roman Catholic theologian around a century ago. But those of us on the Catholic end of the Church of England with our fondness for *maniples* and *vimpas* (go on, Google those, you know you want to) can smile with recognition at this suggestion that the deeply serious and the divinely pointless meet at the foot of the altar.

Goths and Christians both dress to pretend; at least, certain brands of Christian minister do. Once upon a time they weren't alone; 'Sunday Best' was essential gear for churchgoers, and working-class agnostics could blame their absence from divine worship on their lack of anything appropriate to wear. In a previous workplace we were gearing up to a very grand occasion to which I and Susie, the admin assistant, were invited. Susie wasn't sure about what to wear. 'The sort of thing you'd wear to church' beamed the glamorous young public-school educated lady who worked in the fundraising section. Susie fumed. 'When was the last time *she* was in church?' she growled – being, ironically, the Christian of the two. It *was* a pretence, of course, that feeling that you had to dress up to attend the Sacred Mysteries, but it was a way of using clothing to express a moral expectation: to *look* the best you could be.

Nowadays only Christian clergy on the Catholic end of the spectrum dress up in that way, attired not even in smart contemporary dress, but in versions of clothing worn by well-to-do Romans in the years when the Christian Church developed, and elaborated and exaggerated over the centuries since. I tend to think the Roman style of vestments – short, tabard-like chasuble in heavy fabric, and stole and maniple with broad ends – is rather smart, but the Gothic style with its long, flowing cut *is* very elegant (World-of-Polyester modern rubbish, needless to say, just doesn't meet the grade).

You can mount a strong case that this kind of thing has no place in the modern Church. When Anglo-Catholic clergy began to re-introduce vestments into the Anglican Church a century and a half ago, the English establishment didn't like it at all. A *Times* journalist went to a service at St Alban's, Holborn, in London, and fulminated

> To introduce these gilded adornments would in any other profession be despicable childishness; around the solemn realities of religion it is simply revolting to a reverent mind.

Rather more recently, Fr Richard Coles, an Anglican vicar who just used to play piano with The Communards, presented a nice programme for BBC Radio 4 on vestment-making and –wearing. One clergyman's son commented on the accompanying website article:

> My dad looked bad in vestments (and in a cassock) - all priests do. In fact organised religion is one big bad in-vestment. The way this formalised lunacy has been allowed to continue is an emblem of an unchanging machine [sic] to make sheepy-people remain sheep like and the privileged remain in power. I'd just like to see everyone stop pretending that wearing fancy dress made them worth taking seriously, when the opposite is so patently obvious.

And there's sound Biblical backing for that, usually directed at women. St Peter (if it be he) puts it mildly but firmly in the First Letter given his name:

> Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold adornments or fine clothing; rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God's sight.

Of course it is. The qualification comes in one of the most beautiful works of poetry from the pen of one of the most appealing figures in the Anglican tradition, George Herbert the 17th-century vicar of Bemerton in Wiltshire. In 'Aaron', Herbert ponders the contrast between a priestly ideal and his own sinfulness; Aaron was Moses's brother from whom all the ancient Jewish priesthood was supposed to descend, and Christian vestments were believed, wrongly, to have developed from those of Jewish priests.

> Holiness on the head,
> Light and perfection on the breast,

Harmonious bells below, raising the dead
To lead them unto life and rest.
Thus are true Aarons dressed.

Profaneness in my head,
Defects and darkness in my breast,
A noise of passions ringing me for dead
Unto a place where is no rest.
Poor priest thus am I dressed.

True enough; but then Herbert remembers that 'Another head have I', which is Jesus. Knowing, then, that God looks not upon his sins but on the righteousness of his Son, the priest-poet has new confidence to call his flock to hear the Good News: 'Come people, Aaron's dressed', the poem ends. Herbert doesn't say it explicitly, but the idea very clearly comes from the experience of getting ready for worship, putting on the white surplice (which would have been Herbert's only vestment) and thinking about the conflict between what you are and what you're supposed to be. The conclusion isn't a cynical acceptance of hypocrisy, but a determination to try to live up to what you appear to be. The beauty of our external appearance in worship reflects how we look to God – that is, how in his mercy he *chooses* to see us, and in which direction we can choose to grow.

The parish I serve isn't a remarkable one, but it has a remarkable spiritual history, much of which is concerned with an Anglican priest called Reginald Somerset Ward. Fr Ward left parish ministry to become a full-time spiritual director, guiding people through the intricacies of prayer and devotion. He was funded to live rent-free in a house in the village and do his very extensive work from there, work which spanned nearly fifty years and which affected some very influential figures in the 20th-century Church. Ward believed that advance in the spiritual life depended on the stripping-away of illusions and delusions, about ourselves, others and God. The journey of faith could barely begin, he thought, until we at least recognised that there *were* illusions of which we should divest ourselves. The process of growing closer to God through our lives would inevitably reveal more and more that needed to be discarded.

The trap of 'pretending to become' is that you begin to think you *have* become what you're pretending to be: the biggest illusion of all. This is less of a strictly moral problem in the Goth world, where all you will 'be' if you're not careful is an embarrassment. Christians who think they've got

where they're supposed to be going, on the other hand, are not just embarrassing but dangerous, capable of inflicting real harm.

The key is to remember that the driving force in this process comes from outside you, not from inside: your style of dress (and in fact any of the other strategems you adopt to occupy your time) represents not so much an expression of who you *are* but of what you are, in some stronger or weaker sense, committed to becoming. I think Goths understand this too: they know they're not vampires, 18th-century aristocrats, zombies or futuristic warriors or anything else they've chosen to dress as, any more than Catholic Anglican priests like me are embroidered angels. *We* know we look like walking adverts for a curtain company; Goths know they look – well, out of place, let's say, and are happy to carry on being out of place.

I am wont to tell people that as an ordinary Christian you can hide, but a clergyperson can't – if they choose to wear the uniform. They are publicly identifiable and have to come to terms with performing a role. Again, this is to a certain degree pretending, but I've found it's pretence that has a subtle relationship with who I 'really' am. When I put on that black shirt in Mr Taylor's shop on the Cowley Road I was accepting a certain set of expectations, my own included, of what a priest ought to do and be. As a curate at Weybridge and even more as the incumbent of my own church, my experience has been that the 'performative' and the 'real' have mysteriously elided. But the character I've assumed, and then gradually become, who for the sake of the work manages to do and even enjoy things which his self from two decades ago would never have been able to stomach, is just the character I would have chosen to express. But I have only become it by pretending to be it, by accepting the demands of the role. We sometimes casually remark that a certain theatrical role was the one an actor 'was born to play' – implying that the energy of the performance will draw on the resources their life has provided them with. My priestly mask has moulded the face underneath, and yet it was a mask that was already a version of that face. And inescapably, the final version of 'me' – the person that God wants me to be and that therefore I, in my best moments, want to be too – always lies a step beyond what I am. I am always becoming, and never become.

This could be unsettling, this business of discovering there is no 'you' in any stable and abiding sense, that what 'you' are is a performance that shifts and varies and has no clear boundaries. But my experience of it has

been liberating. Firstly, I don't have to defend my sense of self any more from threat: it can billow, stretch and contract according to the demands of the commitments I have made, and 'I' will not be harmed. Secondly, my life has become more directed: I have a project, to grow closer to what I've chosen to become. Thirdly, I can be continually surprised by the good things that come to me, the beautiful things I'm invited to take part in, the goodness that gets revealed to me, not because of who I am but because of the common beauty I and those around me are all striving towards.

Naturally I see this especially through the prism of being a priest. My sense of being given undeserved treasures is strongest when doing specifically priestly, sacramental things. The Church's line has always been that God actually does the work through our co-operating with him, and all I can say is that you do actually feel this, because you know it's nothing to do with you. This is acute at times during the eucharist, when I know that, even though this accident called 'I' is at the centre of what's going on and it can't happen without me, nevertheless I'm only as important as the copper wire the current passes through: without the charge it's just metal, lifeless. I remember being a curate and it striking me for the first time as I went along the row of kneeling communicants handing out little discs of bread and coming across people whose hidden sorrows and tragedies I happened to know, that we were all, together, the means of Jesus taking up those sorrows, and how beautiful and humbling this was. But perhaps the most affecting moments have been when I've heard confessions, and find myself face to face with somebody's guilt and regret. They aren't talking to me, when they talk, but way beyond me; thank God.

The Goth world is a bit more of a game in comparison, but there are moments when similar emotions hit me. These are usually when I've gone to a club and sit watching people dance (I'm no dancer – my ex-girlfriend and I had lessons for a while and it was an achievement when we didn't injure one another), admire the multifarious fashions and styles and think about what I know of my friends' troubles, struggles and dreams, and how they resonate with some of mine. I reflect that it's a privilege to be there among such beauty and courage, again something which is a gift, not a thing I have in any way deserved.

As I've discovered more about myself and the world, it seems less and less as though 'I' begin and end at the boundary of my skin. Instead my edges

have become permeable; I am an individual, but what this means has changed profoundly. And instead of seeing this as a threat, it's become a joy, a mystery I accept with gratitude.

6. I Hate Christians

With no sense of irony, actor and TV presenter Emily Booth illustrated the conflicted Goth relationship with faith matters during an interview by Goth culture magazine Meltdown in 2001, with the words 'I really hate religion. I'm a pagan.'

Well. Where on earth to begin?

Let's try here. Not so long ago I looked up a (typically smug and nasty) news article on an atheist blog and found that somebody had been incautious enough to post a comment asking 'why is this article biased against christians?' One of the posters took it upon themselves to answer:

> Because they are so often self-righteous, repressed, pinched, tight-lipped and bossy and insist on curtailing the freedom of others in what they promote as a virtuous life based on a nonsensical book. Add to that their contemptible hypocrisy: paedophile priests and not just in the RC Church; their enthusiasm for censorship; their readiness to thieve, and the fundie pastors in the USA offer lots of examples; their sick insistence that suffering people must be kept in agony because christians object to assisted dying; their ever-ready hands in the pockets of taxpayers so that christians may brainwash children (faith schools); they have an inbuilt propensity to tell lies and every time they preach they lie so they have lots of practice; they are quick to hate and punish those who disagree with their beliefs – I could go on but that will do.

When I was deciding which theological college would have the honour of preparing me for ordination, I went first to look at the College of the Resurrection at Mirfield. Mirfield is a monastery in the middle of small-town Yorkshire. It's chilly, isolated, and rather beautiful. It had an impressive seriousness. The liturgy was stark and grand. Then I went to investigate St Stephen's House in Oxford. When I turned up for interview the college secretary seemed to have no idea who I was. The student deputed to look after me waved his hand wearily in the direction of a door with the words, 'I *think* this is your room', and never spoke to me again. At Mirfield, the students all had postcards of Byzantine icons pinned to their doors, ancient portraits of Jesus and the saints looking stern and intense. At Staggers (as it was known), the first door I noticed bore a 17th-century block-cut print of a Protestant minister addressing a Popish counterpart with the words in Gothic script, 'I hate your bloudy religioun'. Later on somebody told me one of the chapels had ghosts, including 'Ned the Horse Boy' who sported a horse's head as a result of witchcraft gone awry. In fact many things, I later found, were winkingly blamed on Ned.

Inevitably I went to Oxford in the end. It seemed that its denizens were more, shall we say, multi-faceted. Mirfield's were doubtless that as well (only later did I realise that one of the students I met there was almost certainly ex-Communard Richard Coles, for instance, and I remember a conversation with the moustachioed Welsh chap who was designated to show me around, married to an undertaker, as he lifted up his cassock hem to grind out a fag stub under his foot, and commented 'I'm not that much of a tat-queen* meself'), but that wasn't how they'd chosen to *represent* themselves. Staggers offered more jagged edges, more untidiness, more creativity. Being in the centre of Oxford it also offered greater ease of escape from the horrors of community living, but I suspect the two facts were connected: this was where people went who wanted to think of themselves as having more than one aspect. Part of what makes a lot of Christians awkward company is that they often seem to have no hinterland, do nothing which isn't related to Christianity, or rather to Christian busy-ness. What helps in getting along with them is when they show signs of remembering that the centuries of Christian history before them are not a tale of unadulterated sweetness and light.

We saw how Goths tend to have a 'narrative of difference' which defines who they are, or want to be, in respect to non-Goths: as unusually creative and individualistic people. Christians have a similar, tribal narrative of difference, generated out of the depictions of believers to hand in the New Testament. They often forget how partial and incomplete those depictions are. Even the four Gospels aren't *biographies* of Jesus, as such: they tell you what the authors thought was important, and the other narrative book of the Christian scriptures, the Acts of the Apostles, which deals with the early growth of the Church, is even more fragmentary and odd. Yet very often when Christians discuss it they seem to have no consciousness at all that there might possibly be a gap between its picture of what was going on and of what their ancient forebears were like, and the reality. It's only one reflection of a characteristic blindness to history which is all the more frustrating in view of the importance to the Christian faith itself of historical claims.

More credible accounts of early Christians than those of the Scriptures themselves present things rather differently. I recently read Robin Lane Fox's monumental *Christians and Pagans in the Mediterranean World*. If this great and unsurpassed study is accurate in its portrayal of the ancient

world, Christianity, at least to modern sensibilities, doesn't emerge very favourably compared to the pagan society it hated so much.

Of course, in reality Christians barely differed from the pagans. If you prick me, do I not bleed? Their material needs were the same, their desires and fears for love and security at least bore a family resemblance to one another. There *were* things Christians could not do, at least not without a lot of compromises which, if you were to take it at all seriously, were difficult. Becoming a Christian was always isolating and inconvenient and, at times, rather worse than that. But Christians and pagans were not of different species. Still, perhaps this very similarity encouraged hatred on the part of a group of people who so passionately wanted to believe themselves *different*, and is precisely what makes the Christians of the early Church, held up so often by their modern counterparts as a model, appear so harsh, bizarre, one-dimensional, and humanly unattractive.

On the positive side, these ancient believers were sober, reliable, charitable, and industrious. They were good citizens, in rationalist terms, however much the pagans accused them of undermining society by refusing to pay proper reverence to the gods. But they were obsessive, exercised particularly by demons and sex. Demons were one thing: it didn't take a great leap of imagination to re-interpret the *daimones* or spirits that enlivened the pagan world at every turn as the minions of the Devil. But where did the Christians get their peculiar degree of sexual fixation? Greek tradition regarded the signs of sexuality as polluting in ritual contexts, as many ancient spiritualities did, including that of the Jews, but Christians quickly began to behave as though they believed sex itself was bad, long before S. Augustine developed a theoretical justification by arguing that procreation was the means by which human beings inherited original sin. Two centuries before him, and more, Christians were privileging virginity and celibacy and revering those of their number who refused to have anything to do with the messy business. But the field of sexuality was the clearest way Christians could delineate themselves from the society around them to least cost.

As to a degree it still is. Of all the things Christians could get choose to get aerated about, it is sexual matters that seem to matter most. HL Mencken once defined Puritanism as 'the nagging thought that someone, somewhere, is having a good time', but jealousy is not, I think, what drives Christian moralists in this direction. It's because it's *easy*. Christians

fulminate against the sexually lax not because they are themselves boiling with suppressed lusts (though some are, and sometimes get very publicly caught out), but mainly because that's the sin they've dealt with. It's in the 'OUT' tray, disposed of, not a problem. They know that if they were to spend a while thinking about the other Seven Deadly Sins – avarice, envy, pride and so on – their comforting self-image of being people set apart from the rest of the sinful world would melt away.

This oppositionalism is the habit of mind Christianity falls into wherever it finds itself in a minority position. When it's in control, assured and unthreatened, the mode changes. Medieval Christendom was threatened from outside, from the 'other' that was Islam nibbling at its borders, but inside it was, supposedly, a uniformly Christian order. Perhaps this was why it seemed comparatively unfazed by scientific endeavour. Think of the great technological advances of the Middle Ages: the plough, the watermill, the nut-and-bolt, the mechanical clock, the eyeglasses, even the printing press itself which often gets the credit for the medieval Church's downfall – none of these were opposed by Church leaders. Printing was so *far* from being a threat that the Church sponsored a great outpouring of printed devotional books for laypeople: it was a new means of spreading the Gospel. Yet after the great disruption of the 1500s, the mood turns fearful, and the Roman Church, particularly, falls into darker and deeper suspicion than its rivals. All change becomes a potential threat to belief, and any scientific or social development, from anaesthesia to the enclosed automobile to women wearing trousers, is the subject of Christian outrage and disapprobation with the most amusing and baroque justifications. That naturally meant that all change actually *did* become a threat to belief, once belief nailed its standard to unbending conservatism. The reverse side of an anxious desire to feel special is to fear and disapprove of the rest of the world when it refuses to confirm your self-image, and simply *insists* on managing without you.

So the continual temptation is to approve of those who approve of you. The existential position of Christians faced by a world they can't prevent changing is so precarious that when a secular regime comes along which also looks down its nose at change they fall over themselves to play cheerleaders. Possibly the most chilling picture I've ever seen – chilling for a Christian believer – shows a group of Spanish clerics taking the oath of allegiance to General Franco during the Civil War of the 1930s. They are bishops and cardinals and high-ranking churchmen, bedecked in gorgeous

robes, all well-fed too. Some of them don't look very enthusiastic and have their right hands half-raised half-heartedly; others appear enraptured. But they're all doing it. You can make excuses for them. They saw Franco and his Fascists as a Christian army saving the Spanish nation from the Red hordes of communists, anarchists and liberals; they were reacting to the terrible violence being meted out to the Catholic faithful in strong Republican areas by fleeing for safety to the Generalissimo. But that violence was itself a reaction to the Church's solemn and uncritical accommodation made over centuries with the forces of oppression and conservatism. The Church of Jesus, the powerless, the homeless wanderer, the stranger on earth, turns to the rich and powerful and says, You are right with God; God is right with you. It's no surprise that post-Fascist Spain has turned into one of the most staunchly secularist countries in Europe, and has gone farther than anywhere else in rejecting the morality of the Church that once held sway over it.

There is a parallel, terrible moment in the Passion narrative of St John's Gospel. Jesus, tried, mocked and beaten, has been presented by the Jewish authorities to Pontius Pilate the Roman governor of Judaea with the demand that he be executed. Pilate then in turn presents him back to the mob the priests have stirred up, demanding with increasing unease to know what it is this man is supposed to have done. He knows that others have claimed for the prisoner the title King of the Jews: 'Here is your king', he says. 'Crucify him', rages the crowd. 'Shall I crucify your king?', asks Pilate, to be met with the response 'We have no king but Caesar'. This short sentence is weighted with shocking significance. The chosen people turn away from their God, who has all along claimed to be their one king, and place themselves instead under the authority of the dictatorship of heathen Rome. It's a precise Biblical mirror of those Fascist-saluting clerics in 1930s Spain.

The tendency to fall into line with the world around us is a temptation that afflicts everyone, not just Christians, though we like to think we stand apart from it. But what about God? Christians are supposed to try to be like him, or at least do what he wants. They draw their ideas about what God is like from the collection of two-to-three-thousand year-old writings known as the Bible. Christians listen to excerpts read from them in church and blithely respond, 'This is the Word of the Lord; thanks be to God'. In what sense do we think it *is* 'the Word'? Of course all these texts were written down by human beings, and once you get into it, their history and

their wildly different natures – poetry, letters, biography, history and myth – are entrancing. But were angels whispering in those human ears, dictating the words God wanted written? Some Christians get close to suggesting so. Believing that is their strong fortress against chaos, against the storms and tempests of a cosmos from which God has been emptied, against madness. God is the only thing that stops the universe going mad, and the Scriptures are the only things that can tell you about God.

The trouble is that sometimes the God the Scriptures put on show isn't very nice; he comes across, in Richard Dawkins's words, as 'jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully'; which is pretty comprehensive, and not unjust. You can cope with this in varying ways. If you're a scriptural fundamentalist, you pretty much *have* to conclude that this is indeed what God is like, and live with it; most Christians have not done this, thankfully, except when it suited them. Or, you can accept the picture and reject the God: the story goes that the novelist Evelyn Waugh was quartered during his service in World War One with Winston Churchill's son Randolph, among others. His brother officers eventually got so fed up with young Churchill's prattling that they challenged him to read the Bible all the way through, as he'd had no systematic exposure to the Scriptures before. Unfortunately this produced not quiet but what Waugh called 'hideous excitement' as Churchill discovered all sorts of stuff in the holy texts and was given to crying out as he read, '*God*, isn't God a *shit*!' Your third option is to question whether this account of God is correct. My rector in Weybridge once simply refused to read a particularly sexist passage from a Letter of St Paul as part of the morning Office:* 'I can't read out this rubbish'. When I was between jobs spending some time at the cathedral, one of the canons was faced one morning with a notably bloody piece of genocidal ranting from the Old Testament and only got part-way through before giving up; she recalled that on a similar occasion she'd completed another 'difficult' passage and dutifully stated as the Liturgy prescribes 'This is the Word of the Lord' only to hear the Dean himself* reply from across the chapel 'No it damn-well isn't'. The great second-century heretic Marcion, all those centuries ago, was censured by the Church because he edited his own version of the Bible which simply left out the Old Testament, as he regarded it as the product not of Jesus's God, but of some other and less benign figure entirely.

So what do *I* mean by saying, 'This is the Word of the Lord'? I think I mean this. Behind the texts of the Bible is an experience, a history, of a people becoming aware of a God, at first dimly and then with increasing clarity as they work out that he isn't just a tribal deity, makes moral as well as ritual demands of them, and eventually that he has some sort of plan of action that incorporates other peoples than themselves. Finally there is a single man, whose words and actions are so impressive that, despite the ignominious manner of his death, many of those around him become persuaded that he *is* this God, and reformulate their own religious ideas around him. Something happens to convince them that, although he died, he is now alive, and that this new and different life is something they, and potentially everyone, can share in.

Making matters more difficult is the way this 'narrative' is written. Much of it is composed backwards, in the sense that the form of what we call the Old Testament seems to result from the Jews in exile in 6th-century BC Babylonia musing on their identity as a people and writing an account of their relationship with their God YWHW from older materials, reading back into them a coherent story which wasn't there. Many of the texts weren't written with any sense of 'narrative' in mind at all. When it comes to Jesus, the inconsistencies between the four Gospels and the suspiciously symbolic stories about his birth lead inevitably to the question of how much is actually 'true' and how much consciously invented. But what we *can* say, at the very least, is that a group of people decided to write about an individual some of whose statements are so extraordinary that it suggests that behind that literary figure is a real person whose actual words and acts were remembered enough to shape the narratives. The Word of God is the Word *about* God; and of course in Christian tradition the Word is not something written as much as it is lived, by Jesus, to whom the Scriptures are witness statements – 'testaments'. Sorry that's so complicated.

This is how I square the circle of the Scriptures: their inconsistencies, the historical processes that seem to have produced them, the frank vileness of some of what appears in them. It seems to me a far more interesting, dramatic and moving account than any idea of angels whispering in people's ears, and is, in fact, the only intellectually honest way of looking at these texts. God is still the driving force behind them, but what's actually produced them is not his dictation, but the human urge to talk about him. If God emerges from the texts as not very nice, that's because

the people describing him have had, on the cultural and historical level, a few issues to work through.

Here we probably reach the limit of mutual understanding between Christians and atheists, at least for the time being. We can perhaps agree on the history the Bible texts show us, but there's no way of deciding the *significance* of that history. I had to go to a clergy conference a few years ago which finished with a service, and the Dean of the Cathedral (who I've mentioned) preached the sermon based on two bizarrely juxtaposed readings from the Old and New Testaments. I'm not sure these were the ones, but they were similar:

> When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you - and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But this is how you must deal with them: break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession …

… from Deuteronomy chapter 7. (Remember that these words, in all likelihood, were written hundreds of years after Moses, to whom they are ascribed, was supposed to have lived. What they represent is the Jewish people in exile looking back at their history and saying, This is what we *should* have done, and failed to do. We've never been properly loyal to YHWH; we compromised, we cavilled, we made covenants with heathen nations, we bowed down and served idols, and where did it get us? Defeat and misery. This is what we *should* have done, all those years ago.) Then, from St Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, chapter 2:

> In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has … broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the

> law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; or through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints.

'Think how much it *cost* God to get human beings from Deuteronomy 7 to Ephesians 2', said the Dean. I recounted this to an atheist friend as I thought it nicely encapsulated my own thinking. 'You could just as easily say,' he replied, 'how much it cost *humanity* to get *God* from the one to the other'. And there I suspect we have to leave it. You can read the Bible as the story of God's attempt to get human beings to understand what he is really like, moving them out of overriding concern for themselves, their kin, their tribe, their nation, towards a universal morality; or you can see it as a matter of human beings undergoing that process unaided, and projecting it onto the Imaginary Magic Friend.

Absolutist views of Scripture are one brand of certainty which can make Christians obnoxious; another derives from being very convinced that they can tell who is Saved and who is Not, an abiding matter of interest as we've already seen. All I will say about this is to allude to the fascinating story of the Revd Henry Prince. In 1842 Revd Prince arrived in the small Somerset village of Charlinch (pop. approx. 900) as curate and began a campaign of evangelical preaching and teaching. Eventually he was gratified when many of the parishioners began to turn to his brand of Christianity, with quakings, tears and desperation. His extremity earned him the hostility of the Church establishment and his bishop suspended him, although Prince merely interpreted that as a sign that he'd got things right. His booklet *The Charlinch Revival* reveals an extraordinarily subtle, nay paranoid, attitude to his flock, analysing their words, visions and actions to discern whether they are *really* saved. Of course *he*, the pastor, can *tell.* Yet just a few years later Prince was secluded in a Somerset mansion leading what we now call a 'cult', the Agapemonites, whose members firmly believed that he was God. I don't think he was mad; his book is extreme, but it shows no sign of mental illness in any normal sense. My guess is that the Reverend gentleman had undergone a second conversion, had concluded that his beliefs made no sense, and decided to

exploit his undoubted charisma to lead a life of luxury and indulgence. So much for certainty, either way.

If Christians are to be separate and special, they have to make big claims for Christian 'stuff'. Scriptures, worship and the action of the Holy Spirit must turn Christians into the best sorts of people they could possibly be, and should give them a unique insight into morality and truth. The Church must have an opinion about everything and an answer for everything; if those opinions don't seem always to be worth much, or Christians don't always behave better than anyone else, it's everybody else's standards that must be wrong. (To be fair, I think much of the apparent absurdity of Christian moralising, which insists on bringing ancient texts of varying moral quality to bear on any number of modern issues and dilemmas, results from something we've already noted – that the Church is still learning and, even when it's got hold on an important principle, doesn't necessarily understand what *makes* the principle important.) Put aside the rules of the moral game as Christians define them, and of course you find everyone else is just as capable of being good.

Rather like any group of people drawn together for a particular purpose, but as a result of that proximity discovering something about one another's problems and pasts, Goths look after one another. Zara was unutterably miserable in her home town; Aphra and Alec had to move within London, and arranged for her to join the household they were setting up so she could be closer to the things that gave her some sustenance psychologically. Zara couldn't leave all her problems behind in the provinces, and one day took an overdose. Once she was back home, Goth friends visited and talked, took her out, tried to guide her way through the thickets of the health care system. Cylene, American girl alone in London, was chaperoned from club to club to calm her nerves. Mirabel had to have a routine operation but was very edgy; her friends had a 'funeral party' and deluged her and her husband with messages of support. Tales of people being helped out in sickness or bad situations on nights out are too numerous to mention. On a grander scale, when Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005, displacing many Gothic people, the Goth networks in the US, facilitated by the Internet, offered housing to the subculture's homeless. These are all people brought together not by family relationships or geography, but because they happen to be part of the same subculture.

No Christian would ever claim that non-Christian believers can't be nice to each other, although sometimes they manage to blind themselves to the sheer levels of care and tenderness that go on outside the boundaries of the Christian community. They're left arguing that Western societies are living off the moral capital built *up* by Christianity during the centuries it was in charge; wait around, it will all go wrong. Humanists retort either that human beings are hard-wired by evolution to be altruistic (and we'll examine this idea in the last chapter), or that they have learned altruism through the interaction resulting from trade and other contact. I think there is a lot in this latter idea, which coincides with the ideological movement we glimpse in the Bible, as God's people grope their way towards a universal morality which encompasses not just the humans they happen to know but something more abstract and idealistic. The *sort* of redemptive self-sacrifice symbolised by the Cross of Jesus is difficult to justify in any terms other than its own, but claiming that society itself will collapse without Christian control is, to say the very least, undemonstrated. Yet this, I'm afraid, is what Christians often feel themselves *driven* to claim.

It's hard to avoid the conclusion that some people are born finding it naturally easy to be good, while others have to strain at it, and then experience makes it easier or harder to be good or bad. 'To make good people do bad things you need religion', said physicist Steven Weinberg; though it's also worth asking what you need to make bad people do good things. I find goodness hard. I am by nature lazy and self-absorbed, and have very little natural sympathy with others: I have to make a positive effort of imagination. As I progress I discover I'm a far *angrier* person than I would ever have guessed, and there are people who've come up against flaws in my personality. Yet I, and all Christians, are regularly engaged in worship in which we commit ourselves to the very highest standards of personal behaviour, worship which is supposed to be uplifting and call our attention to a perfect God who we are intended to emulate. I find that, no matter how low I feel, pronouncing the words of the Liturgy will make my mood better: the 'sober intoxication of the Spirit', as St Gregory of Nyssa put it, produces a sort of exultation in me no matter what you might argue I *ought* to be feeling considering my own failings. Am I a hypocrite, and all those around me too?

When I moved in to the Rectory I had a little house-warming party for friends from the LGMG. Mirabel and Dorian bought me an air-freshener

bearing the cheerful legend 'Wash Away Your Sins!' and a cartoon of a slightly sardonic looking woman who to judge by the wings was supposed to be an angel but who had more the aspect of a 1950s American housewife. The directions for its use went thus:

1. *Determine strength of sin*
2. *Beg for mercy*
3. *Remove cap and point pump towards transgression*
4. *Mist as required*
5. *Emerge free from sin, ready to do it again*

If I can so easily leave behind feelings of guilt, is that silly, satiric depiction of superficial sin and forgiveness actually accurate?

Brendan and Mandy were booked in to get married at the church, and so as I always do I took them through a process of preparation. One exercise is what I call my 'Mr & Mrs quiz' in which each partner has to answer questions about the other, and then we talk about what they've written. One of the questions is 'What are your partner's good points?', and if it's clear that the couple may never have actually stated what they like about each other in those terms it can be moving (we do also talk about 'weak points'!). When we got to that stage in the quiz, Brendan went first and recited what he though was great about Mandy. It was clear – as I could see but he couldn't as he was reading his answers – that Mandy was fighting back tears. I found I had to waffle a bit to give her a chance to recover. She wasn't used to being praised by somebody else, even the man she was going to marry.

This is what God does to us. We know what we really are, and so does he. But the sacrifice of Jesus means that things change. Christian tradition has usually insisted that God's view of us changes because he looks at us through the prism of Jesus's faithful life and death, that we are 'covered' by his sacrifice and treated as good and righteous even though we aren't. I suspect the process works the other way too. We are able to see God through the Cross and know what he is really like, and that the relationship between us is governed not by wrath but by love. There's no getting away from this in the Eucharist because it's a declaration that love is at the heart of everything, all the way through. We may feel (rightly) that we don't and can't *deserve* such treatment, but the liturgy is equally insistent that we *get* it no matter what we may feel.

I know myself to be a sinner, but, like Brendan and Mandy with each other, and God with all of us, people see the best in me and what I do, because of the clerical collar, and tend to be almost unreasonably grateful when I achieve nothing more than doing my job. Some human beings manage this all the time, always viewing others and their actions in the best possible light. They are the ones whose souls have advanced farthest down the path towards sainthood, and instead of doing the normal English thing and rubbishing their generosity with what we take to be humility, we should steel ourselves to accept it, and be grateful that they see us as we would like to be rather than as we are.

St Seraphim of Sarov was a Russian monk who left his monastery to become a hermit in about 1793. One day while out chopping wood, he was attacked by robbers, who beat him until they thought he was dead. They found there was nothing worth stealing in Seraphim's hut: his only possession apart from tools was an icon of the Virgin Mary. Despite being left with a hunched back after the attack, Seraphim walked many miles to the robbers' trial to plead for clemency for them. In later years his wisdom and ability to heal drew crowds of visitors, who he welcomed despite his desire for solitude because he believed God wanted him to (he could, so the story goes, discern what penitents wanted to confess before they spoke – my old rector's brother found that the modern Italian saint Padre Pio had the same gift, if gift it is). Whenever a new visitor arrived, Seraphim would prostrate himself before them, and greet them with 'Christ is risen! Welcome, my joy'.

Not all of us make it that far. But you do occasionally meet someone who seems truly transfigured. Phyllis (her real name, for once) was in her mid-80s when I knew her, working at the Museum at Wimborne in Dorset. She was a widowed former head teacher, chairman of the Museum Trust, and also of the Wimborne Minster Governors, an ancient body which acted as guardians of that great church's properties and endowments. Once I and the Curator visited her flat to collect something for the museum; it was bright, white, full of light with the occasional icon and cross, and somehow seemed a joyous space. Phyl was a joyous person overall. She certainly gave an impression of toughness, but there was never the merest hint of complaining at the modern world or its people, a habit we often fall into in old age. She loved young people and always took an interest in them, and championed every step we took to make the museum fun and outward-looking. Gratitude and joy –whether natural or shaped by her

faith I don't know – had worked their way through Phyl, filling her with light and life; I was more grumpy and misanthropic at 24 than she was at 85.

One Sunday morning (when I wasn't there) the main Mass at the Minster was interrupted. Phyl, who invariably walked to church each Sunday morning, had been stabbed in an alleyway on her journey. The Rector rushed to the spot but Phyl died either there or soon after, I can't recall which. Her assailant was a disturbed teenager; the exact truth behind what had happened never properly emerged, but it seemed that she'd told him to stop damaging a wall and he then attacked her. What was unmistakable, and remarkable, was that there was very little anger in Wimborne as a result of Phyl's death, despite the shock; everyone said what a terrible event her murder was, yet virtually all the reaction, as I remember, centred on her and what a lovely person she had been: a sense of loss, but not resentment. It was just a sad, meaningless tragedy. The national tabloids tried to make it a 'you-can't-walk-the-streets-nowadays' sort of story, but there was little of that feeling in the town itself. It was as though the joyous quality of Phyl's life and personality had absorbed all of that before it had even happened, and transformed it into thanksgiving; which is what the Lord she believed in did. That's how it's supposed to work.

7. La Belle et La Bête

The devotion to Our Lady Queen of Sorrows, concentrating on the events of the Gospel that brought sadness to Mary, is medieval and very Catholic although the imagery of the seven swords piercing her heart comes from eastern Orthodox Christianity. It's Spanish religious art that gives her a crown, spiky halo and robes of gold and black. This little statue is mine, as it happens. Christianity is a religion which, in theory, celebrates life, but finds ample space for woe!

> The same afternoon after siesta, Hadrian sat at one end of the great white-marble arc-shaped seat. A yard away sixteen cardinals spread their vermilion along the same seat. Little tables stood before them, with tea, goat's milk, triscuits and raisins. The Pope preferred to sit here where the pavement was of marble: because lizards avoided it, and their creepy-crawly jerks on grass or gravel shocked his nerves. He was sure that reptiles were diabolical and unclean; and his taste was for the angelic and the clean.
>
> - *Frederick Rolfe,* Hadrian the Seventh *(1904)*

The ancient Hebrews would have understood what the fictional Pope Hadrian meant about lizards. A good portion of the law-codes that make up the Torah, the first five books of the Jewish scriptures and therefore of the Christian ones as well, are regulations governing which animals can and can't be eaten; which are 'clean' and which 'unclean'. Notoriously, of course, good Jews don't eat pork, and pigs are, equally notoriously, animals that like dirt. But that can't be the explanation for all of the proscribed beasts and fowl, including such delicacies as shellfish which, the Hebrews were convinced, were 'an abomination to the Lord'. Instead, what seems to have rendered an animal 'unclean' was its violating proper rules of the way animals were supposed to be: if it strayed from one category of creature into another, if, for instance, it lived in the water like a fish but didn't have scales, or if it had cloven hoofs but didn't chew the cud, it was somehow a sign that creation had gone wrong, and the pious shouldn't consume it. The rules were (we might suggest) a way of making clear, however dimly and distantly, that there was a proper Order to the cosmos, and that humans should keep their eyes fixed on that divine Order even when it was obscured and twisted by the world they actually saw around them.

And of course Hadrian has a contemporary and very real counterpart, Benedict XVI, who both before and after his election to the Papacy has done a lot of thinking about beauty. In this as in much else he rows against the tide of modern ideas: we're so used to thinking that matters such as aesthetic appreciation are purely subjective and down to nothing more than individual preference that arguing otherwise seems a bit weird. Benedict lifts his terms from Plato and suggests there are two sorts of art, 'Apollonian' - after the ancient Greek god of the sun, light and music – and 'Dionysian' named from the deity of wine, intoxication and ecstasy. Apollonian art appeals to reason, order, calm, and 'elevates', while the Dionysian mode is instinctive, visceral, chaotic and animalistic. Benedict

talks particularly about the way he believes these two forms are reflected in music; plainsong, he claims, is Apollonian and uniquely suited for use in worship. Plainsong, essentially, is rhythmless and consists of one single musical line. I can only take a little plainsong at a time, but it does indeed have a curiously calming effect: it always feels as though a plainchant hymn is rooted somewhere else, anchored in eternity rather than the emotion or circumstances of the moment. How it actually *does* this I leave to musicians and psychologists to work out, but, subjective and vague though Pope-Emeritus Benedict's ideas may be, they have something to them.

What Benedict makes of Gothic architecture, that spiked style of tension and drama opposed to the rational symmetries and orders of Classical art, I don't know. Peter Ackroyd's 1985 novel *Hawksmoor* is a fantasy woven around the 18th-century architect Nicholas Hawksmoor who won a contract to build a number of very distinctive churches in London, still being reconstructed at that time after the Great Fire. In the novel, Hawksmoor is transformed into Nicholas Dyer, secret Satanist intent on encoding occult meanings into his churches and engineering deaths as sacrifices to the dark powers at each site; the Hawksmoor name is given instead to a modern-day detective investigating a series of murders at those same churches. In the first chapter Dyer states his creed:

> I shall only say at this point that I, the Builder of Churches, am no Puritan nor Caveller, nor Reformed, nor Catholick, nor Jew, but of that older Faith which sets them dancing in Black Step Lane. He who made the World is also author of Death, nor can we but by doing Evil avoid the rage of evil Spirits. Out of the imperfections of this Creator are procreated divers Evils; as Darknesse from his Fear, shaddowes from his Ignorance … Adam after his fall was never restor'd to Mercy, and all men are Damned. … Life itself is an inveterate Mortal Contagion … Sathan is the God of this World.

Dyer sets himself to build churches which will bear hidden witness to his beliefs; which, though ostensibly dedicated to the Christian God, will by their very form summon the mind to melancholy, hopelessness, and unreason. He argues with his boss, Sir Christopher Wren, who is a cheerful rationalist, and slowly the churches rise. Go to look today at Christ Church, Spitalfields; St Anne Limehouse; St George's-in-the-East, Wapping; St Mary Woolnoth at the centre of the City; the creations of the real Nicholas Hawksmoor. They are not *formally* Gothic, but they break all

the rules of the Classical book even though they have round and not pointed arches. There *is* something very, very odd about them all.

Hadrian VII's taste is for the 'angelic and the clean', but Goths may be seen from outside to be privileging just the opposite. For a start, there is the prevalence of *black* in the Gothic palette, which to outsiders signifies the Gothic temper if nothing else does. We've already touched on some of the meanings of black – and there are many contradictory ones – but there is no escaping its natural association with darkness and therefore with threat, danger, and death, a deep, primal linkage; 'Black is the badge of hell and suit of night' says Shakespeare. Despite the persistence of black in the garb of Christian ministers and religious orders, some Christians get edgy when ordinary laypeople choose it too: demon-busting Anglican bishop Graham Dow once claimed that 'a fondness for the colour black' can be a sign of diabolical possession. With depressing regularity, young Goths describe Christian parents being shocked and dismayed at their offspring's adoption of the Gothic wardrobe – *even when* those Gothic youngsters carry on being Christians. 'Blackbird' complained to Gillian Venters's Gothic Charm School website in these terms: 'How can I help my parents understand that while I may appear in black lace and Jack Skellington themes now and then, I'm not trying to fit in, stick out, rebel, or become a witch?' But, after all, it was hinted to me in my first year as a curate by one of my superiors that choosing to wear black was a sign of mental illness; which is just a medicalised version of Bishop Dow's demon-possession. And the Gothic impulse goes on from just *black* into cobwebs, spiders, skulls and monsters, an entire deathly aesthetic. Gothic boys and girls attire themselves in funeral dress, make up as corpses, and step the graveyard dance. They tend to regard all this as a hoot, but perhaps they aren't very well-prepared to explain *why* they do to others who see it as questionable.

They might reply, if they had a mind to do so, that Gothic doesn't reject beauty at all; in fact, beauty has a high value in Goth thinking (a leading Goth lifestyle magazine based in the US is called *Gothic Beauty*). It's just that Gothic *looks* for beauty in unexpected places. It's possible to appreciate the beauty of some elements of Goth style simply in formal terms – elaboration, juxtaposition of colour and shape, symmetry or contrast – even when they're married to deathly imagery. I'm looking, at the moment, at one of US artist Sylvia Ji's paintings of girls made up as La Catrina, the glamorous and threatening skull-faced woman who features

prominently in the Mexican festival of *El Dia de los Muertos*, the Day of the Dead. Her face is painted in elaborate patterns of black, white and red, delicate and precise, and surrounded by thick swirls of sable hair. She bears around that face, that image of death-in-life, symmetrical leaf-framed blood-red roses. In formal terms, in respect of colour and form, it is an undeniably beautiful composition; a painting, yes, but that's the effect plenty of Goths aim at imitating in life. I remember seeing Dr McLintock, Goth academic, conducting an interview at a festival with a horror-movie actress; what with the vertiginous boots, diaphanous white drapes, elaborate blue and black makeup, chains linking to piercings linking to clothes, and what appeared to be a pair of ram's horns in her hair, it was no surprise that when Dr M got up after the interview was over she moved *very very carefully*. Hers was a fashion statement which functioned *statically*.

But there is a conception of 'beauty' in Gothic which goes beyond that formal, compositional sense into a meditative one: considering what thoughts and feelings the work – photograph, painting, music, dress – arouses in its consumer. The deathly imagery of Gothic is genuinely *morbid* in that it crosses borders and blurs boundaries, introducing deathliness where it would not normally be. Anything that hints at brokenness, at things being out of order and *wrong* – 'Broken is Beautiful' could be a Gothic slogan – leads in the direction of the deathly too. Goth models drape themselves over gravestones; a French webzine *('webzine dark-ambient, neofolk & classical, orchestral, bombastic, musique rituelle et éthérée')* calls itself brokendolls.org; and so on. The destination is the same, the undoing, the positive rejection, of the healthy and whole.

The wonders of the internet: I had in my mind a phrase that expressed something of what we're fumbling around here, 'ecstatic downward motion', but where that phrase had come from I'd long since forgotten. Google rediscovered it for me: used in a review of silent movie star Louise Brooks's 1985 collection of essays about her film career and contemporaries, *Lulu in Hollywood*. What sustained the book, argued the critic David Thomson, like her greatest cinematic achievement *Pandora's Box*, was 'ecstatic downward movement, the creep of darkness, and the central light of Lulu, plus the rhythmic wreckage of all the men drawn to her'. It is very, very hard to pin down, but this is why Brooks, and the Lulu figure she played and with which, even in her own mind, she seemed to merge, figures as large as she does in the Goth imagination. They instinctively 'get' her. In 1988 Siouxsie Sioux caught Banshees fans off-

guard by appearing at the Albert Hall in a Brooksian bob, rather than her customary wild backcombed corona, for a performance billed as 'Lulu in London'; while in 2011 a young Brooks fan posted a video on Youtube composed of excerpts from her movies backed by witch-house band Pictureplane's track 'Goth Star'. Uniting in her image destruction, self-destruction, and the allure of destruction, Goth Star is just what Louise Brooks is. She embodies enticing deathliness, the threat and appeal of human undoing, in a particularly and piquantly beautiful package.

Sensitive to where their own aesthetic tends, Goths try to defend its edges and separate what is Goth from what is not-Goth. This effort is much older than youngsters arguing about Marilyn Manson on the internet: they've been doing it, in different forms, for two hundred years. In 1826 the doyen of the first wave of Gothic fiction, 'the great enchantress' Anne Radcliffe, published an essay in the *New Monthly Magazine*, 'On the supernatural in poetry', in which she drew sharp lines between shock-literature full of corpses and rot, and her own more decorous fiction that relied for its effects on *not* revealing the sources of unease. It was the difference, she claimed, between *terror* and *horror* – the latter being altogether an inferior matter.

I think of Mrs Radcliffe as I turn the pages of Francesca Gavin's *Hell Bound – New Gothic Art* (2008), a compendium of contemporary dark artworks. There's not much in here that I would define as 'Gothic': not only is formal beauty virtually absent; not only are the artworks very explicit rather than hinting at unease and morbidity and leaving the rest to the imagination; but I do think Gothic needs to show a dual nature of attraction and repulsion – as I've put it in the past, 'horror' says 'It's coming to get you!' while 'Gothic' says 'You *want* it to come and get you!' It's not just about making an onlooker think 'ugh', which seems to be the chief motive of a lot of *Hell Bound*'s material.

But is this protesting too much? If critics, clerics and art curators can see some family resemblance between Gothic, and those things Goths might want to *deny* are Gothic, may they have a point? Gothic does seem more Dionysian than Apollonian, more inclined to nod along with the contentions of Nicholas Dyer than those of Sir Christopher Wren; and it's hard to keep that dividing line between terror and horror firm. If John Keats was right that 'beauty is truth, truth beauty', is ugliness in some sense *untrue*? If God is the fundamental base of everything, and

underwrites what truth is, can ugliness go against the grain of creation? Does the beauty of the broken necessarily lead to the vile?

Back in chapter 3 I mentioned my liturgical fantasy, the *Missa Apocalyptica*, which ran away with my imagination until abandonment was the only cure for it. Fantasies of destruction occur in Gothic too. Siouxsie Sioux and Budgie's side-project away from the Banshees, The Creatures, produced a song called 'Exterminating Angel' in 1999:

> Here it comes again, taste of jagged glass and rusty can
> There are just black holes where the stars would be watching
> Just black holes where the stars should have been
> Plumes of dirt caress a urine-coloured sun
> Swarms of angels come to kill your sons
> And there's nothing but black holes where the stars should've been
> Nothing but black holes where the stars would be watching …

The song proceeds through images of menstrual blood, piss and locusts, but the scabrous lyrics on their own do little justice to the insistent brutality of the rhythm, the nihilistic battery of Siouxsie's diction. 'Exterminating Angel' has no story or scenario: it's a naked, unrationalised outpouring of bile and disgust, the purest expression of the urge for destruction. A couple of years before, The Banshees had with more ambiguity and obliqueness described the link between this kind of rage, rage turned outward, and rage turned in on the self in 'Love Out Me', the final track on their final album and a triumphant statement of what the band had always been about:

> I smash the glass into my face
> Cutting through to my disgrace
> Disregard for bone and flesh
> How can I be in such a mess of unlikeliness
> I smash my likeness …
> Anger tinged with sadness
> It's always been like this
> Place the dagger twixt my breast
> My nearest and dearest
> I hurt it, I hurt me,
> Hurt everything around me
> There's nothing, no trace
> Still cutting to find the place …

The staccato cry of the chorus, 'Love out me', halfway between an order and a plea, has no normal meaning: it's ungrammatical, the sign of a broken mind. But that's just why it makes sense.

But, perhaps, makes sense only to other broken minds. Gothic may be a place where such broken minds and hearts can breathe freely, run and play and make their own aesthetic rules. Once you've found that place of safety, you want to stay there. You grow to love it and the people you find in it who share your own exile. You want to hug tombstones, feel the moss and damp, and curl up in the dark, to sing about swarms of exterminating angels and swallowing black holes. Christianity, on the other hand, is a rhetoric of joy, light, and life (it claims). It's as though Jesus stands in front of those of us who have a Gothic temper, holds out his perfect hand, and demands we surrender the very things in which we have found most comfort.

In her song 'Dead is the New Alive', Emilie Autumn outlines with typically bitter irony the critical view of Goth culture, that it turns death into a fashion statement – 'a gothic play revival … The obsession with death becomes a way of life'. To pull off that trick, you need to be a long way from real death and real suffering, and people who aren't as far away as you may not react very well to your recruitment of the deathly into your style of choice. Late in 2011 I watched my father die at the end of two years of suffering with Alzheimer's and Parkinson's Diseases. He contracted an infection and his weakened body was unable to fight it off. In the morning it was clear what was likely to happen, miracles aside, and he was put on a ventilator. By the middle of the day his breath was laboured and heavy; gradually it grew weaker. Shortly before 10pm a doctor examined him and told us his organs were failing and, with our permission, the hospital staff moved into the 'palliative phase' in which it is assumed the patient is dying, and the focus shifts from treatment to easing their way. For the next three hours his breath gradually became shallower and shorter until it was hard to detect at all; we strained to catch every last shift and change. Finally he gasped and stopped breathing altogether. For about thirty seconds we could still see his throat moving, and then that stopped too. By the time the nurse had finished making the necessary checks, it was dreadfully clear he was dead as his whole appearance had changed; it didn't look like a human being any more. I'd seen plenty of people approaching death, and more after death had

happened, but this was the first time I'd observed the transition from the one state to the other. It isn't very nice, and the way the body fights, involuntarily, to keep going, is piteous. And my dad's experience, or rather ours with him, was short compared to that of many people.

As we said, Christianity claims to be a religion that cherishes life. It's easy to overlook this – curiously, as the resurrection of Jesus, his return to an albeit transformed and transcended life, and the expectation that what he underwent is what awaits us, is the core of the faith. Nevertheless I found myself, at St Stephen's House, sat in our doctrine classes wondering why nobody in my previous eight years as a Christian had ever pointed out to me the true implications of the Resurrection. If God had allowed himself to become human by the eternal Son being born in a mucky stable as Jesus of Nazareth, there must be something basically *right* about life, and the resurrection of Jesus is a triumphant vindication of his human life. The Gospels claim he has a very strange *sort* of body after his rising, it's true, a kind of body that can appear in locked rooms and not be recognised at first by his friends, but a body it still is: he (very deliberately) eats fish and invites Thomas the doubter to touch the wounds he bore on the Cross, and which his flesh still bears. This is a faith which, like the Judaism that gave it birth, is resolutely *carnal*. In his ministry, Jesus spends a lot of time having meals with his friends (and those who aren't his friends, too), and cures people of their diseases so they can live full, purposeful lives, rather than telling them to put up with infirmity and pain like a good pagan Stoic philosopher would have done. He goes to a wedding at Cana and turns huge jars of water into the finest imaginable wine so the party can carry on. This is not exactly a picture of earthly life being denied.

The resurrection of Jesus confirms his affirmation of life. The high point of Easter in churches of a Catholic tradition is the Vigil and Mass of the Resurrection, often celebrated in the early hours of Easter Day as the dawn breaks. The service begins in darkness with readings and psalms outlining the saving work of God over time. Then the congregation moves outside where a fire has been lit and from that is lighted the Paschal, or Easter, Candle, and small candles for the people to carry. The deacon bears the great candle aloft into the dark church, halting three times to sing 'The Light of Christ', each time a tone higher – a column of light making its way through the darkness. The Candle is placed in a stand and the ancient hymn called the Exultet is chanted:

Rejoice, heavenly powers; sing, choirs of angels!
Exult, all creation, around God's throne –
Jesus Christ, our Lord, is risen!
Sound the trumpets of salvation!

Finally, after the initial prayers, the Gloria, the great hymn of praise which is normally sung at every Eucharist but which has not been heard since the start of Lent six weeks before, rings out and the lights are turned on (when we kept the feast at Staggers during the time I was there, we also had fireworks at this point – much to the Principal's, and our neighbours', surprise). Light floods into the church from which all colour and signs of joy have been increasingly banished throughout the sombre season of Lent, the pain and sorrow of Holy Week and the livid horror of Good Friday. For the next seven weeks, the Great Fifty Days of Easter, the emphasis in the prayers and worship is all on joy and exultation.

The Easter liturgy reveals what Christianity is supposed to be about more clearly than any other point. The dichotomy of light and darkness, of life and death, is absolutely clear and unequivocal, and I always find the service intensely moving even when I am having to worry about its choreography. It affirms, utterly, three things: the intense value and worth of human life, the vital importance of beginning new life through repenting and turning to God, and the hope for life to come of the sort Jesus is already living. How had I managed not to realise any of this until I got to vicar school?

None of it, it must be said, is terribly Goth. Is 'life' what I want? Even St Paul once felt that 'to die is gain'. Do I want to look on the world and feel at ease with it, with the life it offers me; do I want to *live*, or at least, to live the sort of life I imagine the Christian God might want me to live? Do I want God at all – or is the challenge of potentially surrendering my hard-won position, in which the toys of nightshade and graveyard accoutrements are my joys and comforts, too much?

My own conversion to Christianity felt like being hunted down, caught by some force I found alien and unwanted, and being driven towards something I did not want to be or identify with. It took several years before I came across similar sentiments in the Victorian poet Francis Thompson's lyric 'The Hound of Heaven'. Thompson's verse is overwrought and clogged in a very High-Victorian way – a bit like the

era's velvet-and-aspidistra-cluttered style of interior decoration – but it speaks strongly to this sense of being chased by God.

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase
And unperturbèd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat – and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet –
'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'

And the poet carries on fleeing, seeking comfort and security but failing anywhere to find it, until he can run no longer, and God finally reaches him, and declares:

'All which thy child's mistake
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:
Rise, clasp my hand, and come!'
Halts by me that footfall:
Is my gloom, after all,
Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?
'Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He Whom thou seekest!
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me.'

The final *coup de grace* in my own disagreeable conversion, long before I ever came across Thompson's treatment of the theme, was reflecting that a loving God could only ever want for me what I in my best and most rational moments would want for myself, and that rejecting such a God, if he existed, was – stupid. And, like Francis Thompson, I found that God was happy to give me back some of the things I loved providing I first surrendered them to him. He might not always, though. The time might come, in the future if not now, when I might, might, be called upon to

surrender some of what I love; when the deathliness of Gothic and the vitalism of Christianity can't rub along with one another any longer.

And things have changed. Since being ordained I've been exposed to more sorrow than I would otherwise have been, simply by being in the position I am. Most people move in circles of family and friends which may be rather limited because of the way modern society works; online relationships promise contact but can be kept at arm's length. The Church, however, brings you face to face with illness and death in a way you wouldn't have encountered, just by being part of a wider group of people. Laypeople may have the option of turning up at church on a Sunday and disappearing at the end of a service, but clergy can't hide, and usually know more of what's going on than most folk in the pews. A group of average human beings carries a lot of sorrow and breakage, undergoes a lot of pain, much of it hidden to the casual view. As a result, no suffering holds any romantic glow for me any more, if it ever did.

Christianity needs the dichotomy dramatised so deeply by the Easter Liturgy because it's fighting a war against the natural tendency of human beings to self-satisfaction, self-sufficiency, and complacency; it has to state its case in such stark terms because, boil everything down to essentials, and that's what you have, life and death, light and darkness. If it's a war and death is the enemy, the interloper in God's world, whose side are you on? But we know that isn't necessarily how we experience things. To those who are terminally ill or suffering from long-term pain (as well as those who may care for them), or simply bored and wearied by living too long, death is a release. 'Sweet Sister Death', no less a person than blessed St Francis, he of the birds and animals, was bold enough to sing. The case is less extreme than the Church generally makes it, *has* to make it.

The reverse side of Emilie Autumn's caustic line 'the obsession with death becomes a way of life' is that it becomes a way of *living* as well as a way of *posing*. Plenty of people with a Gothic temper have discovered that a deathly aesthetic can lead paradoxically to a deepened appreciation of what life has to offer, rather than to a life emptied of meaning. It's not so much that superficial pagan ethic, 'eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die', as a realisation that pleasure and delight are serious, precious, because (in this world and in this form, at any rate) they are not forever. Gothic, paradoxical, ambiguous as it is, absolutely *insists* that death is implied in life, and *vice versa*: refuses to lose sight of the one in the face of the other.

Dying – imaginatively – in order to live more deeply is a paradox Christians ought to recognise and respect; 'Nothing comes to life except first it dies' St Paul warns the Christians of Corinth. That stupendous rite of Easter Day comes after a week in which Christians concentrate with painful intensity on the Passion and death of Jesus, re-enact it symbolically, take it into themselves and see how their own lives embody it. As part of the Easter Liturgy the congregation is sprinkled with water from the newly-blessed font as a reminder of their baptism, the act in which they were ritually drowned and reborn, gathering in one point all the little deaths and renunciations and rebirths they will undergo in their earthly lives. Life is celebrated; but just as firmly is death fixed as the indispensable gateway to true living.

This concentration on the reality of outward, bodily death is a way of thinking about the inward death of the affections and attachments which, Christian spiritual writers insist, everyone has to undergo in order to make any progress in the inner life. Here is the great Fr Richard Meux Benson, the Victorian Anglican priest who founded the Society of St John the Evangelist, better known as the Cowley Fathers, and whose old monastery premises in east Oxford my theological college took over:

> If in death we would have life, we must now be continually dying by grace. We must not think that Christ died in order that we might live to this world, but that we might live forever. Christ died in order that we might die along with him. Christ died in order to set us an example of death; to sanctify death for all those who die along with him. An unmortified soul is no disciple of Jesus Christ. The soul that flies away from mortification, flies away from Christ upon the cross. The soul that flies away from mortification, flies away from the door of heaven.

It bears stating that the mortification Fr Benson is talking about isn't dramatic austerity, thrashing yourself with holly leaves or heroic fasting: the Cowley Fathers never went in for that sort of thing. What he means is being attentive to life's sorrows, sufferings and setbacks so that we learn from them whatever God wants to teach us, and discover the secret of offering them to him. The Victorian monk's words are not much different from those we find on the website of a group of US-based Christian Goths who call themselves the Blue Rose Society:

> If the Spirit takes charge of your life He will expect unquestioning obedience in everything. He will not tolerate in you the self-sins even

> though they are permitted and excused by most Christians. By the self-sins I mean self-love, self-pity, self-seeking, self-confidence, self-righteousness, self-aggrandizement, self-defence. … Through it all He will enfold you in a love so vast, so mighty, so all-embracing, so wondrous that your very losses will seem like gains.

(I say the 'secret' of offering our pains to God because I don't think I have managed it. I'm fortunate that I haven't had as much pain as some people, and can understand how long-borne pain can dry up the faith of even the most devout.)

Death and life, as well as being so very opposed, chase each other round within the confines of both Gothic and Christianity: each leads into the other, dances inseparably with the other. The luscious and lurid video for Anna Calvi's 2011 single 'Desire' illustrates the dance, and crosses all the boundaries we might expect, bringing together the imagery of death and life, Gothic and Christianity. Dressed in black and red and looking terribly Hispanic even though she's as English as Polly Harvey with whom she's often compared, Ms Calvi sings about heaven and the Devil while all around her are crosses and fire, golden skulls lit with flickering candles, blood in bathtubs, Madonnas and Christs, snakes, cherubs and enigmatic shadows …

> The fire – the fire – the fire – is heavenly, heavenly …

Desire is heavenly even while it burns and consumes, she insists. Aoife McArdle, who directed the video, describes the process of assembling it as 'exercising my inner Goth'. The obvious way of understanding the song, and the imagery, is as a reflection of *sexual* desire, but the words aren't so explicit. I see 'Desire' as illustrating perfectly the fact that the sexual impulse is a sign of the wider human need to reach beyond our own limitedness, our own boundedness, of which the business of individual life and death mark the confines. Sex marks the crux of life and death (it creates life; and without death there would be no need for it), and Gothic and Christianity are each concerned with both; so it's no surprise that the kaleidoscopic urgency of the film, its fragmented, delirious delineation of an ambiguous sort of hunger, can be viewed in both Gothic and Christian terms at once.

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We've wandered a long way from the consideration of beauty and ugliness. What about the deliberately, vilely bestial and foul – where might that take us? The local churches in this area run an annual trip to Worthing for older people, and, tagging along this year, I went to a small second-hand bookshop where my eye was caught by a title along a shelf, *Nightmares in the Sky*. This book turned out to be a compendium of photographs of gargoyles in the US, with an introduction by horror writer Stephen King. Gargoyles, of course, serve the decorative purpose of disguising the chutes channelling waste water from roofs. In the Middle Ages their often dire appearance was, so it is said, intended to symbolise the passions and sins people were to leave behind them when they went into church: it was angels round the roof within, demons without. That doesn't explain why these distressing beings should continue to adorn the secular architecture of 19th- and early 20th-century America. Stephen King speculated in his essay on the offices modern gargoyles perform for modern people:

> A drain is a perfectly utilitarian device for venting waste-water; gargoyles, with their dreamlike, hideous array of faces, may well serve much the same purpose for our minds: as a way of venting the mental waste material made up of our hidden fears, inadequacies, and even our unrealized and mostly unacknowledged aggressions (you might note, as you leaf through these pages, how many of these beasts are seemingly insane with rage). … I am suggesting that the gargoyles you will come upon in this book may continue to perform their original function: to drain away that which might otherwise cause rot and erosion. Their horrible, stony faces offer a unique catharsis … There is nothing pretty about having your stomach pumped or pissing into a catheter, or having a doctor put a drain into an impacted cyst to drain off the laudable pus. Not pretty – but useful … [Gargoyles] are dark throats, dark gullets, dark drains from which accumulated muck may spew – and thus be dissipated.

It may be that as you progress in the spiritual life this catharsis becomes unnecessary, that as you (and the Holy Spirit) work on your soul there is less and less accumulated muck that *needs* venting; one might hope so, anyway. But there's no short cut, it seems to me, in achieving it. We have a tendency to imagine that we can find short cuts to being good, to abolishing by single efforts who we are in our secret natures; sometimes we try through self-help, sometimes through social policy, sometimes through political repression. Often the Christian Church has concluded it can short-cut the process too, and joins in with the State's enthusiasm for

telling people what to do. All that actually works, however, is the gradual growth of the individual soul towards God, and that can never be a matter of imposed rules and procedures because it is about one person getting to know another and being changed by the relationship. That's why, this side of the Last Day, we will continue to need our gargoyles, ringing our spiritual walls, spouting their rank and stagnant fluids, and reminding us of (part of) the truth.

8. Living on the Edge

William Hogarth's 1760 print, The Bathos, imagines the end of the world not as a cosmic conflict ushering in a new creation, as Christian myth insists, but as a maximally-entropic state in which even Time expires with a breath. It's the Second Law of Thermodynamics illustrated, a grimly humorous depiction of a Godless universe.

There isn't actually much about Gothic in this chapter, but we start with a Goth. In the Spring of 2011 Lainë, the witty Scandinavian, posted on Facebook about watching the latest instalment of Professor Brian Cox's BBC TV programme *Wonders of the Universe*:

> There's something ever-so-slightly creepy about it when he says things that make me cry with this constant, unfaltering, enthusiastic, borderline bonkers smile on his face. He could be used as a weapon of mass depression.

What was it that made her cry? Dr Cox was examining the idea of entropy, the fact that, assuming the energy of the Big Bang continues pushing the universe ever outwards, eventually that energy will dissipate beyond the point at which it's of any use. Matter begins as 'organised' and proceeds to 'disorganisation'. The crowding-together of all matter at the start of time was infinitely structured and organised, and everything has ever since been getting more *dis*organised, requiring an ever-greater input of energy to hold that disorganisation back. In a closed system, such as our universe, order inevitably decays. Dr Cox illustrated this with a sandcastle, a completely organised structure. Once the moisture which holds it together dries out, the sandcastle can't maintain its shape and collapses into chaotic, disorganised sand. That's what the whole cosmos is like. That's what awaits everything that is, everything we create, everything we are; that's entropy. And that's what made Lainë cry.

'All this,' warns the pop physicist in the show, 'might make you a bit depressed'; but he goes on to comfort us that we shouldn't be, because 'life is the means by which the cosmos understands itself. We are the consciousness of the universe'. Mystical eyewash, I'd call that: the cosmos doesn't understand anything, doesn't learn anything, doesn't remember anything; all it does is fall slowly apart. A gorgeous (and not unaffectionate) spoof version of *Wonders of the Universe* uploaded to Youtube put these slightly less hifalutin words into Dr Cox's mouth:

> Try to imagine a trillion, trillion, trillion, billion, gazillion … ff … times – five billion, hours, weeks on end. We'll all be gone. All your stuff, everythin'. Just be fuckin' dead. And that's why I love physics *so much*. Because it gives me something to do *before* I die.

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Lainë said she 'thought about entropy quite often'; I'm not convinced this sort of existential angst is more prevalent among Goths than among people at large, but I certainly have it, and always have had: a suspicion that the world teeters perceptually on the edge of a precipice, and may at the faintest pressure in just the right place collapse into an abyss of pointlessness. Entropy, I tend to feel, sucks the life out of everything I might do: it's as though everything there is, no matter how appealing the surface may be, is nothing but dust coated with a sparkling shell. Just 'something to do before I die'. I feel the need to combat this, to come to terms with it, to discover purpose and sense – to inject some philosophical energy into the closed entropic system. My spiritual director chided me for this habit: 'You think too philosophically. Most people don't feel the need to fit everything into some sort of structure. They usually have a few phrases and ideas they've picked up, just enough to keep them going'.

For some of us, really big, universal-explanation ideas have the capacity to relativise everything else around us into virtual insignificance. I sit and listen to the radio early in the morning and hear reports of politicians and their quarrels, of economies and their strains, of celebrities and their antics, and it all seems so much chaff – that the *real* game is being played elsewhere, whether it's the war against entropy which life is doomed to lose, or the war between elements of the genetic inheritance we carry inside us to survive. The colours of the everyday world drain and its images seem comparatively unreal. We gaze on ash, eat it, rub it into our skin.

Plenty of atheists I know don't understand what I'm on about, don't see the problem. I was debating the subject on my friend the Heresiarch's blog ('Countering complacency, received opinions and incoherent thought', says the title) and he finally became exasperated. 'This is just a philosophical question, not a real one', he wrote, 'most people just get on with their lives'; and at that point I gave up trying to explain. If that wasn't complacent, I don't know what is. When I asked whether people knew of any texts that might illustrate the social consequences of the theory of evolution, one witty individual commented that I would find them 'next to those on how quantum chromodynamics has affected home baking'. *Id est*, no issue, no problem. I sometimes feel like saying to some of the, shall we say, *insouciant* unbelievers I know, 'I envy you your lack of faith!' It would resolve a number of questions.

Entropy is one thing: if there is a God, there's every reason to think we won't get as far as the Heat Death of the universe. Physics is, in any case, such a speculative discipline, and its inescapable inability to penetrate the mystery of the origins of the universe, *except* by speculation, doesn't challenge the existence of God necessarily. There seems to be a higher proportion of atheists among the chemists and the biologists, however, and I think Christian fundamentalists are right to see the 'philosophy of life' as the stronger challenge to God, and, perhaps, to existential hope.

Lots of small children are fascinated by dinosaurs, and so was I. I'm rather mortified, in fact, to discover that some of my infant favourites are now held not to have existed at all (poor old Brontosaurus). At least the Diplodocus is still there: I never questioned my Dad's repeated muttering 'Diplodocus, Diplodocus, the window to watch' when I was a child, until a year or two ago when I found out it was pinched from an advertising jingle on behalf of menswear store John Collier. Anyway. Perhaps as a result of this common childhoos fascination I've always taken evolution as read and, unlike some Christians, never seriously queried either the colossal age of the Earth or the notion of the evolutionary development of species. However, as a former parishioner, who happened to be a neurosurgeon, once pointed out to me, the early chapters of the Book of Genesis themselves support the idea of the progressive development of life on Earth. All right, the Bible has the creation of the sun and moon out of order, but everything else – plants, then fish, then birds, mammals, and humans in that sequence – is a pretty good guess for a Bronze Age civilisation with no scientific way of knowing what had happened in the remote epochs of the past. Ascribing this process to natural selection, as Charles Darwin did, is quite another and more challenging matter.

Why should God, the Christian God of love and justice, have chosen to create through such a colossally wasteful and violent process? Because evolution by natural selection is both. The great majority of creatures will either not survive long enough to reproduce or will produce lines of descent which will quickly come to an end themselves. They will be engaged in constant warfare for the limited resources the world presents to them, and will develop subtle and horrible ways of competing with one another. It was Alfred Lord Tennyson who first wrote 'Nature red in tooth and claw' in that gloomy poem of early-Victorian doubt, *In Memoriam AHH*, and opposed nature directly to the creed of Christ. *In Memoriam* was

published eleven years before Darwin expressed his own doubts to his friend Asa Gray:

> I own that I cannot see as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of Caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice.

The great man is referring to the ichneumon wasp, most species of which lay their eggs in living caterpillars so their larvae will have a source of food when they hatch. Earlier generations of Christians might have seen such horrors of nature as consequences of the Fall, Adam and Eve's rebellion against God, echoing through Creation, but by Darwin's time science had removed this option. He was left with the bare fact, as are we.

River Out of Eden (1995) is perhaps evolutionary biologist and atheist campaigner Richard Dawkins's best book. He uses his poetic and metaphorical imagination to lay out an accessible version of his own account of how evolution works, that it is driven by the genes themselves, the bundles of chemical code that tell living cells how to grow and develop. Ultimately, says Dr Dawkins, it's not individuals that 'compete', or even species, but their genes, flowing down the aeons like a river, branching and recombining, and only temporarily housed in this or that being. It's a rather beautiful description.

But not all is beautiful. For the universe, says Dawkins, looks just as we would expect a universe driven by the blind forces of the gene to look, and nowhere can we discern the footsteps of God. Taking his cue from Darwin's ichneumon wasps, he hammers the point home repeatedly:

> This is one of the hardest lessons for humans to learn. We cannot admit that things might be neither good nor evil, neither cruel nor kind, but simply callous – indifferent to all suffering, lacking all purpose. … Nature is not interested one way or another in suffering, unless it affects the survival of DNA … The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation … It must be so. If there is ever a time of plenty, this very fact will automatically lead to an increase in population until the natural state of starvation and misery is restored. …

> The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. … DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.

My atheist friends may think this doesn't matter, that to imagine we human beings must take our moral cues from Nature is 'the naturalistic fallacy'. The high proponents of natural selection are not so complacent. Charles Darwin, a man of compassionate and liberal sympathies in advance of most people of his day (including most Christians), saw quite clearly the hazardous implications of his thinking, even though he had no inkling of the existence of genes as such, and took refuge in Whiggish progressivism. In his 2006 book *The God Delusion*, Dr Dawkins himself takes quite some time attempting to rescue the moral sense which is clearly very important to him both from his own convictions about the natural world and from any suggestion that religion is essential to morality. He gives a very plausible account of how 'Good Samaritan' behaviour – that is, acting well and even self-sacrificially towards individuals who bear no relation to you and therefore don't carry your own collection of genes forward – might have developed, and been selected for naturally, early in human history: we're programmed to be altruistic, and so we still behave altruistically, even when those primitive conditions no longer apply and such actions no longer help our genes survive. We can all think of examples of this kind of thing. In my parish is a small flower shop, and opposite it lives an elderly lady. The proprietor of the flower shop has become friendly with the lady; she goes to visit her, does her shopping for her now and again, keeps an eye open for her. There's no direct social benefit the florist derives from this, and still less does it assist the survival of her genes. They'd be better off if she concentrated on breeding rather than helping out an aged and unrelated individual who's at the end of her life. Dr Dawkins approves of this kind of behaviour, on a human level, even though it's evolutionarily useless, because he is a liberal, humane man. He calls such acts 'Darwinian misfirings' and says that they are 'precious' and 'blessed'. He seems to get almost tearful about it, as well he may. I had a bit of a tear, too, when I found out about the florist and the old lady.

But it doesn't wash. There are three difficulties, it seems to me, which we can frame as three questions. How do we know what's good; Why should

we *be* good; and (which is a bit less 'merely philosophical') *Can* we be good?

How do we know what's good? The trouble with an account of reality that wipes out the idea of there being a purpose to things is that, along with purpose, any objective vocabulary for assessing the goodness or otherwise of acts also gets erased. Dr Dawkins and other atheists are quite right to criticise Christianity for the evil it has managed to wreak over its long history. But they're right only if we regard harm done to human beings as an evil thing. On what grounds can we do so? A thing can only be called 'good' or 'bad' by reference to its purpose; without purpose, all we can rationally say is that a thing can cause a particular being pleasure or displeasure. The whole vocabulary of morality is empty, meaningless, and to ascribe moral significance to purposeless altruistic behaviour is perverse.

We could nevertheless decide that whether a thing causes pleasure or displeasure is the way we'll define good or bad, *faute de mieux*: the base on which we will found our behaviour and the yardstick by which we will assess ourselves. That's where question 2 comes in: why should we human beings do this? Nature doesn't; nature is indifferent to suffering and is interested only in the survival of strings of chemicals. Why exactly is it that we should choose to be any different, except in so far as it may suit us to avoid the possibility of others causing displeasure to ourselves? What is it that should make human beings morally separate from everything else that exists? Should any of us decide to do this, there's no rational argument that could persuade anyone else: it's arbitrary and subjective. There is a very political aspect to this: what if my assessment of my significance and that of my pleasures and needs is disputed by somebody bigger and better armed than me? Poor lookout for me in this world, and no reason why anyone else should care.

Thirdly, and most seriously, even if we *were* to decide that this was how we wanted human society to function, *could* it? We may be programmed for altruism, but we were programmed for it in long-passed circumstances and, when circumstances change, ill-adapted genes die out. People who act self-sacrificially are somewhat less likely to reproduce and thus pass on the genes which have brought about that self-sacrificial tendency than people who don't. Gradually Richard Dawkins's 'blessed misfirings' are necessarily bound to become fewer and fewer through the blind processes

of natural selection; otherwise they wouldn't be 'misfirings'. To behave self-sacrificially is to swim against the flow of the River Out of Eden and, as such, in the long run it's a hopeless and irrational venture. We'd better be thankful that we've been born now and not 100,000 years into the future. We dance to the music of our DNA. How on earth can we imagine we might be able *not* so to dance? No more than we can indefinitely prevent Brian Cox's sandcastle collapsing. It seems to me there is one way out of this evolutionary dead end, which I'll come back to later. But for now let's leave it there.

Most of this book has been a mixture of musings and anecdotes, but so far in this chapter I've become a bit argumentative. I've done this to show what's at stake. I'm sure Richard Dawkins is absolutely right when he says the world gives us no convincing reason on its own account to believe in a God. That has to come from somewhere else.

My conversion, if you remember, rested on one single matter: what I made of the story of Jesus's resurrection. That was crucial. An interesting word, 'crucial'. The Latin *crux* means *cross*. Quite apart from any Christian gloss we might like to place on it, this is about the crossing of roads, the taking of decisions. Applied to my conversion, it's like the meeting-place of two utterly distinct worlds of thought and experience, funnelling down to a single point, like a pair of cones joined at their apex. Either side of the crucial point are two non-communicating realities, one soaked through with the resurrection of Jesus, one from which it is absent, two universes which obey different laws, and have a different colour. The world looks different from either side.

Many believers teeter on the brink of unbelief. This doesn't at all mean their faith is weak or hesitant; it means that it has a necessarily narrow base. It means you might flip from utter faith to wholesale infidelity. It means, very often, that you are relying on whatever is at the core of your conviction to keep you behaving as though it was true, because you will get precious little support from the world outside. It means, in my case, that now and again it feels as though I am pitting those poor, fragmentary documents which record the experiences of the first Christians against the whole weight of bloody and dark reality. God is not just a fact among facts that can be removed and leave the rest of the structure of life unaltered, like pulling out a block in a game of existential Jenga. He's the one block that will make the tower fall.

In 1880, Friedrich Nietzsche announced the Death of God. This eccentric German thinker, whose eccentricities eventually got the better of him and took him to the asylum, liked to compose parables, and told one of 'the madman who ran through the town square, crying that God was dead'. What Nietzsche meant was that, after two and a half centuries of philosophy, it was no longer possible to believe in God, because we now knew that what we thought had no necessary connection with what was real and effectively, therefore, nothing could be taken as real. God was the last guarantor of reality; it existed because he did, and as he stood outside human perception and reasoning, his statements about truth could be relied on. The death of God meant the whole phenomenal world was wiped away. There was no horizon any longer. Nietzsche's solution was to embrace this as liberty. We were free to make up our own realities and believe in them, and the most profound and poetic myth-makers would be the conquerors of the new landscape. They would be, he said, *Ubermenschen*, Super-men, because with their minds would they make the world. You can see how this seeps into modern consciousness in watered-down and bastardised forms, the most banal of which are statements along the lines, 'Well, that's true for *you*, but it's not true for *me*'. However, if we *could* swallow all this it might make things a little easier. We could, at the cost of enormous strain, consciously create new Gods for ourselves, though we might well risk madness too. Perhaps it's not such a bad thing that most of us can't. The phenomenal world appears to have some sort of reality; and, as has been said, even if I can't *prove* that what I'm sitting on is a chair, it will probably do until somebody brings along a real one.

The consequences of the Death of God, as Nietzsche understood it, really stand beyond belief and unbelief. On the other hand, the theists and the atheists inhabit the same world as one another, a world about which things can be known with more or less certainty: they simply disagree about what those things are, and fight over the significance and nature of a cosmos whose basic existence is taken as read. (In fact, the believers may actually be somewhat more sceptical than the self-proclaimed rationalists about what can be known, as some scientists seem to think it is perfectly rational to reject a phenomenon as untrue simply because they can't explain it in terms of what they think they already know.) No, the collapse of the God thesis entails a smaller thing than the end of reality itself, but still, for some Christians, an existentially devastating one – the end of *meaning*. Clearly, if teleology – the idea that the universe is purposeful – disappears, the possibility vanishes of reaching any statement of what life might be *for*

which can be justified by anything outside our own decisions and will. In fact, this is a parallel version of Nietzsche's existential voluntarism, only translated into the sphere of moral action rather than existence itself. A smaller thing, then, but only just smaller.

You can see how precarious this is, and how little it rests on. My faith depends a great deal on historical enquiries: how reliable are these documents, how were they transmitted, how far do they represent any reality behind them? And what about the people behind the documents? If the texts present a picture of a group of people who became convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead, how far was that perception affected by what, if anything, they expected to happen to him, and how do we know not only that the story *they* tell about *him* is real, but how real is the story the *Church* tells about *them*? Nor is my concern with these issues particularly unusual. The Christian religion, more than any other before it and arguably any since, rests its case on a particular set of events in time and how they are to be interpreted. The early Church knew this sure enough, and showed the importance of historical data in the respect it gave to the church communities which could trace their origins to the Apostles, and to the texts which could be (more or less plausibly) traced to Apostolic authorship –those which found their way into the Biblical canon while others the Church was less sure about were excluded.

All these are debatable matters; and people do indeed debate them, round and round and round. At the base of the Christian faith there is a strange and maddening void, the emptiness that we encounter as we draw close to the figure of Jesus. Much as scholars of the past century struggled to reach through the Scriptural witness to the 'real Jesus' hidden behind it, it became increasingly clear that there simply *was* no getting behind it. The *kerygma* – the proclamation by the Church of what it believed about Jesus of Nazareth – is all there is. There is no secure witness to Jesus's life outside the Biblical texts; no corroborating data, no coins bearing his image, no monuments in his name. There isn't even any distance between the Gospels, the written accounts of his ministry, and the proclamation of the Church – the Church *produced* the Gospels.

This is what allows ultra-sceptics to claim that Jesus didn't exist, or that we can't trust anything that was written about him. Not even many atheists put much stock in such off-the-wall opinions, but they are capable of being argued. The haziness of the evidence is also what rouses

Christians to risible exaggeration. I remember reading one Church leaflet claiming the Gospel writer St Luke as 'a research historian', a phrase not only meaningless in the setting of the 1st century, but plain wrong in the context of ours. Then there was the atheist friend who was confronted by a street evangelist with the claim that 'There's more evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ than for the existence of the Roman Empire'. 'Have you ever been to Rome?' asked my friend. Of course he hadn't, Christians don't go to interesting places. 'If you do, you'll find there's a big round thing in the middle of it called the *Coliseum*.' There is no knock-down argument on the side of Christian orthodoxy, just, at best, a balance of probabilities.

For millennia, human beings believed that the sun went round the earth. This is a perfectly rational conclusion to draw from our casual observation of the world; it certainly doesn't *seem* as though the earth is moving, while it certainly *does* seem as though the sun is. Since the Greek philosopher Ptolemy first delineated this vision of the heavens, it slowly became linked to all sorts of other thoughts and theories about the nature of things and the connections between them. The Ptolemaic account was a very beautiful and moving model for understanding the universe. It needed a bit of tweaking and amendment as more was noticed about how planets and stars actually moved around, of course. In fact, as time went on it needed quite a lot of amendment. By the sixteenth century those amendments included such baroque elements as epicycles and retrogression to explain why the planets appeared to follow their eccentric paths through the heavens. When, finally, the monk Copernicus pointed out that, in theory, all these difficulties disappeared if you thought of the sun as being the stationary point and the earth revolving around it, it only needed a couple of tiny nudges to bring about disaster. Tycho Brahe observed comets passing *above* the Moon, that is, in what was supposed to be unchanging, uncorrupt space, and apparently smashing through the crystal spheres which were believed to carry the planets, and Galileo discovered the moons of Jupiter; and the entire Ptolemaic cosmological system, lovely though it may have been, buckled and fell under its own weight. It was not actually *disproved*. It was just monumentally *unlikely*.

Paradigm shifts are like that for individuals, too. For me, the moment came when I realised that all the elaborate rationales of how the Scriptures might have come to be written had to be concocted simply to avoid the one obvious explanation that Jesus had really come back from the dead. The

atheistic account had too many epicycles and retrogressions to be maintained. Yet, as I look back from the Christian side of that decision, sometimes it seems very much as though the Christian faith itself is buttressed with so many mini-explanations to account for the gaps in the great explanation that collapse is ever on the cards. While I was preparing for the rite of confirmation which made such a difference to my own beliefs, I asked our rector Campbell whether there was any room for 'conscientious doubt'; he genuinely didn't think such a thing was *possible*. As far as he was concerned, the evidence for the truth of Christianity was so strong that anyone who doubted it *could* only doubt it for questionable reasons. I didn't swallow that then, and do so less now. Atheism, in contrast, seems eminently sensible: the only thing it can't adequately explain is the one thing it actually needs to.

Other people, of course, rest their faith on other bases. Sometimes they have had a subjective experience of God which they find it impossible to set aside. This was what happened to the Orthodox archbishop Anthony Bloom:

> The feeling I had occurs sometimes when you are walking along in the street, and suddenly you turn round because you feel someone is looking at you. While I was reading, before I reached the beginning of the third chapter, I suddenly became aware that on the other side of my desk there was a Presence.
>
> This was so striking that I had to stop reading and look up. I looked for a long time. I saw nothing, heard nothing, felt nothing with the senses. But even when I looked straight in front of me at the place where there was no one visible, I had the same intense knowledge: Christ is standing here, without doubt.
>
> I realised immediately: if Christ is standing here alive, that means he is the risen Christ. I know from my own personal experience that Christ has risen and that therefore everything that is said about him in the Gospel is true.

This convinced Metropolitan Anthony that, as he was fond of putting it, 'God is a fact'. It didn't protect him from extended attacks of depression, and this sort of subjective experience, even if felt as something that happens to you objectively and external to the emotions, is hardly immune to doubt. As it happens, I've never felt on the street as though somebody is looking at me; and if you have had that feeling, and then on another occasion apply it to a sense of spiritual presence, how secure would the

spiritual experience be? Subjective experiences can always be given natural explanations, no matter how powerful they appear to be; and Anthony Bloom always maintained he was on the edge of suicide when he had his epiphany, which casts an uncertain light on the episode. It is what you might expect God to do; it's also what you might expect an hysterical mind to do. Even such miraculous phenomena as spontaneous healing, for instance, can't call God into existence on their own: they are more economically, if unsatisfyingly, explained by positing some natural mechanism which we have not yet scientifically investigated.

I am, I must stress, not here chasing these matters to any conclusion, merely drawing the outlines of the problem. I'm aware people do manage with radical scepticism, but to do so consistently would entail a very odd way of living, as Douglas Adams's *Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* characters discover when they encounter the Man Who Rules the Universe, as we mentioned in Chapter 5. The galactic government has got around the inherent problems of democracy and dictatorship by secretly referring all its most difficult decisions to someone completely isolated from everybody else, and who believes nothing is real. Zarniwoop, by the way, is in the story the editor of the bizarre encyclopaedia called the *Hitch-Hiker's Guide*, and has devoted a large part of his life to finding out who really is in charge of things. This result, for him, is a bit annoying:

> Zarniwoop: Don't you see? The decisions you take affect the lives of billions of people.
>
> Man: I don't know them, I've never met them, they only exist in words I think I hear. I don't mean to harm anyone. The Lord knows, I am not a cruel man.
>
> Zarniwoop: Ah, you say, The Lord – so you believe in –
>
> Man: My cat. I call him The Lord. I am kind to him.
>
> Zarniwoop: All right. How do you know he exists? Or how do you know that he enjoys what you think of as your kindness?
>
> Man: I don't. I have no idea. It merely pleases me to behave in a certain way to what appears to be a cat. What else do you do?

Take away God, and this is the outlook I know I have to have. I also know I stand no chance of being able to sustain it. Madness lies that way.

During my curacy, I woke up once near 3 o'clock in the morning. This is a bad time to do any thinking, when the night is at its blackest and the body at its lowest ebb. I found I no longer believed in God. It happened that easily, not so much through thought as an absence of thought and of distracting and comforting sensory input. It took my then girlfriend to remind me what I knew and tell me I was being silly. But the seriousness of the matter could not be doubted. Discovering that I didn't believe wouldn't just mean the loss of my livelihood and social identity, it would also mean the death of love, the ruin of hope, the collapse of a moral universe, the bitter and hard work of re-orientating an entire life. It was the going-out of the sun. It was like looking out of your window onto an everyday street, and watching a small dark spot whirl and spread until it consumed the entire scene and everyone you thought you loved.

I can't rule out the possibility that this melancholy turn of mind had some influence on my spiritual development. Perhaps a constitutionally happier person might not have the kind of discontent that drives one to ask existential questions and seek answers; so, hazardous though it may make my spiritual life because it means I never *stop* asking the questions, nevertheless without it I wouldn't be here at all. It could even be that this is the *same* discontent, the same sense of being a being out of place, that propels a person towards the Gothic, to seek solace in strange music, deviant art, and abnormal fashion. As we've seen, in that case, too, most people come to an accommodation with normality, suspend judgement and put the angst and questioning to one side as they grow older and more accustomed to who they have chosen to be. But the discontent does not entirely die: it continues to be manifested through those outward unsettling signs.

There seems to be a strange mechanism whereby I seem ready to plunge into the very darkest waters, and at that moment an intervention will come to make me feel better – perhaps not in any way that addresses the problem directly, but which works nevertheless. On one occasion, I was walking to church as usual, but barely able to put one foot in front of the other out of crushing sorrow. A family I often passed on their way to school – Mum and two small girls – appeared, went by, and then called me back. It turned out that the elder child had been very insistent that morning that she should pick a flower and give it to me, 'because you sometimes look sad'. I still nearly fall down with gratitude when I

remember the incident. But so many events occur in life that we should expect such synchronicities. They are not, necessarily, traces of God.

Such tiny miracles will convince nobody. They can, nevertheless, function for believers as shafts of light breaking through the clouds, and have a relationship with the facts that we hold on to which really are the core of our belief. They soften the heart like rain softens the earth, and God intends us to have soft and fleshly hearts. They make the facts which we hold on to so tenaciously, and sometimes bitterly, spring to fresh life. We must rehearse these small wonders, and remind ourselves of them often, learning thankfulness through them, discovering in them the signposts that point us on the right way when the landscape is barren and bereft.

We must also, perilous though it may be, rehearse the dark moments as well as the lighter ones. Christians are called to witness; I suspect we must witness to ourselves, tell ourselves our story, as much as to anyone else. Many Christians have no experience of what it's like to be a non-believer; and if they have, that time before conversion is almost always conceived as a monstrous landscape of evil which the lucky Christian, Thanks to the Power of Jesus! has had the good fortune to escape. There's no hint that they may actually find themselves back there again (oddly enough, that great myth of the Puritan consciousness, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, didn't make this mistake – it's arisen since). People do stop believing. Perhaps not a great many undergo a crisis of faith and stop observing their religion, and if they do it's very likely that the clergy responsible for their churches will never find out about it. I've only met a couple so far. Perhaps it's even more common for people to stop believing, but to carry on practising their religion for different reasons – though if the belief was at any time very deep or well-thought-out that will not be a very easy trick to carry off. But nevertheless, people stop believing in God.

Not only is it the case that life often does lead back in directions we thought we'd left behind, but memory fails Christians too. It may be that the work of realigning the self towards God is so hard, in a way so unnatural, that to recall any part of what went before makes too costly a demand. That's not to say the former life is not remembered: everyone has a 'testimony' to give of their transition to salvation, of sins covered and bad habits abandoned. But the new Christian's discovery of joy obliterates that deep sort of memory which *inhabits* the past, can *revisit* it, can explore

again its rooms and contours, and reduces the former life to a rote-learned recitation.

In Chatham years ago I met a zealous convert. 'I was a gangster who broke legs for a living', said Don, 'I thought religion was all rubbish. But I fell off a ladder and soon I could only walk on crutches. Then I met some Christians and they started praying for me. I prayed and I was surrounded with this light. It was Jesus, he saved me! Look at me, I can walk again. Jesus even taught me to read, I was illiterate.' And all that seemed to be sort-of true. Only gradually did you learn Don had given up crime years before his accident, and married a Christian lady years before his conversion; and you'd notice that he often still hobbled about on a stick; and that, while he *could* read, he couldn't read very *well*. The story wasn't exactly untrue, but it wasn't true quite the way Don told it.

Remembering what it feels like, remembering what it's like to *think* atheistically, is exactly what would keep a sense of connection with people who *don't* believe. Deep, honest memory can transform a self-dramatising myth of moral triumph, which is so often the story Christians tend to tell about their relationship with God, into a more realistic narrative of survival, one which has much more chance of resonating with the world most people live in.

Yet that world – in which most people live – is still the one driven by the apparently blind processes of natural selection. So we return to the earlier question: Can we be good? How can we keep 'Darwinian misfirings', misfiring, if that's what we want?

But what if they are *not* misfirings at all? If altruistic behaviour is produced by our genes, and it's the environment that decides which genes compete successfully, this provides hope, because alone among animals we human beings *affect* our environment. We can, to a very limited but nevertheless definite extent, choose which traits are selected for; and, even more, if our behaviour is shaped by our inheritance of altruism, and our environment is in turn shaped by that behaviour, then human altruism is, slowly, hazardously, refashioning the world. This is why my theology tutor at Staggers, Michael Lloyd, has written that 'Evolution points to God'; not denying that purely evolutionary processes are quite adequate to explain why the traits we most admire in ourselves have developed, he

nevertheless highlights the way in which those traits achieve a kind of 'lift-off' and acquire purposiveness in themselves:

> Morality, creativity and love … seem to have outgrown their original biological purpose, like a cuckoo in the evolutionary nest… Each of them seems to have developed a life of its own, such that it no longer seems to do justice to morality, to creativity or to love to see them purely in terms of their survival value.
>
> Now none of this, I accept, proves the existence of God. All it does is two things. First, it shows that evolution points beyond itself. It shows that evolution points to a need for different levels of explanation than the biological alone. And secondly, the development of morality, creativity and love mesh suspiciously well with the sort of God Christians believe in.

The leap our own moral traits have made out of being survival mechanisms and into purposiveness mirrors the leap which, Richard Dawkins and others speculate, converted basic chemicals into genes.

The evolutionary process seems to reflect the way we discover moral truth, the only way we can do so in fact, by experiment and hazard and gradual tacking towards it, first this way, then that; the same way, as I've suggested already, that the Church may know true things without understanding, yet, why they *are* true.

I suspect, in fact, that this is what the Judgement is. The cosmos moves, says orthodox Christianity, towards a moment when the truth of all things will be revealed, evil will be defeated and destroyed and a new Creation ushered in for eternity. Yet when Jesus leaves his disciples, the Gospel of St John has it, he promises them the coming of the Holy Spirit who will 'guide them into all truth' – that is, he doesn't just *tell* them all the truth and leave them to get on with it: truth, it seems, has to be lived and learned in order to be grasped. God can only go so far in presenting us with an outline of what is evil and what is good: the rest we must, with some assistance, discover for ourselves. The movement towards the Day of Judgement is a movement towards naming good and evil for what they truly are, when our knowledge becomes such that the division is made completely and unmistakably clear. The last century has seen the development of theories of universal human rights and attempts to enact them, a new awareness of the unique value of the individual, and

prosperity and opportunity unmatched in human history; it has also, thanks to technology and the increased scope of political power, seen violations of those ideals on a hitherto unknown scale. The light and dark have advanced together, as we discover more clearly what they are. Why God might have chosen this means of us learning our way forward, with all its wastage, is another matter.

Perhaps the two worlds of belief and unbelief, either side of the crux point, the decision to convert, are not as far apart as they may seem, and perhaps, for the movement of the collective heart and mind God envisages, he needs traffic in one direction as much as in the other. But for any individual the passage between them remains fraught with mental hazard. It may be that Gothic Christians can't avoid the danger, though, given that Gothic itself is a form of tension and paradox, ever insisting that inconsistent facts, drives and urges simply must be held together if human beings are to be true and honest: 'Goths choose to stand on the giddy edge of things', writes Richard Davenport-Hines, 'They take the riskiest paths up the volcanic slopes to peer into the crater'.

I once asked someone who was in a position to know what had happened to a very active Goth Christian who seemed to have vanished. 'If you work on the edge', he replied cagily, 'You run the risk of falling over it'. Living on the existential edge might seem exciting, especially if you're young; the older you get, the less enticing it seems, and there are other dangers than intellectual unbelief. I've been with people who are dying, and the dead; I've met sadness and madness and sin and recognise the havoc they wreak in people's lives, and the deformity they work on the image of God in them, the people they *could* be, including myself. Most of all I know that my own mind is cast in a deeply melancholic manner which, as is the manner of melancholy, has both benign and deeply malign facets:

I'll not change life with any king,
I ravisht am: can the world bring
More joy, than still to laugh and smile,
In pleasant toys time to beguile?
Do not, O do not trouble me,
So sweet content I feel and see.
All my joys to this are folly,
None so *divine* as melancholy.

I'll change my state with any wretch,
Thou canst from gaol or dunghill fetch;
My pain's past cure, another hell,
I may not in this torment dwell!
Now desperate I hate my life,
Lend me a halter or a knife;
All my griefs to this are jolly,
Naught so *damn'd* as melancholy.

… wrote Robert Burton in that greatest of all books – excluding naturally the Bible, he says sweetly – *The Anatomy of Melancholy* of 1621. I know how what starts as gentle sadness can harden by imperceptible steps into murderous rage, or into the death of the heart that would be the death of a priestly ministry too, hating life and the people you are sent to serve. It does happen: some do fall over the edge. It could happen to me. If suicide can be an act of aggression, who is it I hate enough to fantasise about death in that way? Everyone? I have cause to fear.

As part of the service where a priest is licensed to a parish they are supposed to lead prayers in their new church for the first time. These can be rather back-slapping occasions. I couldn't do that, and so this is part of what I prayed at Farncombe. It was a bit over-the-top, but I did mean it:

> And, merciful Father, I bid the prayers
> of these my brothers and sisters
> that I be preserved
> from hardness of heart and coldness of soul,
> from bitterness and indifference,
> from sloth and rage and selfishness
> and all the malice of the Enemy;
> and kept awake to thankfulness and love
> shown us in Christ the King of Glory.
> Amen.
>
> And may John the Beloved Disciple,
> and Mary the great Mother of God,
> and all our friends in heaven
> pour out their prayers for us before the throne of grace.

And yet, because knowing despair is precisely what enables you to know joy, you have to keep them both together – if you can. As theologian John MacMurray suggested in *Reason and Emotion* in 1935:

> In imagination we feel sure it would be lovely to live with a full and rich awareness of the world. But in practice sensitiveness hurts. It is not possible to develop the capacity to see beauty without developing the capacity to see ugliness, for they are the same capacity. The capacity for joy is also the capacity for pain … That is the dilemma in which life has placed us. We must choose between a life that is thin and narrow, uncreative and mechanical, with the assurance that even if it is not very exciting it will not be intolerably painful, and a life in which the increase in its fullness and creativeness brings a vast increase in delight, but also in pain and hurt.

And if ever a Christian wrote a Gothic insight into the state of things, it's that.

Glossary

Anglo-Catholic – the bit of the Church of England closest in style and thinking to the Roman Catholic Church, which emphasises tradition, authority and ceremony.

Benediction: the ceremony of the ritual blessing of a congregation using the bread blessed at a communion service.

Book of Common Prayer: the official, old liturgy of the Church of England, devised in the 1530s by Archbishop Cranmer and finally settled in 1662.

Confirmation: a rite during which somebody who was baptised as a young child makes for themselves the promises made for them by their godparents.

Corpus Christi: Latin for 'the body of Christ', the Christian festival commemorating the institution of Holy Communion.

Dean: the senior priest on the staff of most cathedrals, and some other Church institutions too.

Earth Mysteries: the whole area of study that reads occult significance into ancient sites such as barrows, henges and megaliths.

Gothic Lolita: Lolita fashion originates from Japan, and involves dressing in highly elaborate costume recalling the dress of little girls in fairy-tales. 'Sweet Lolitas' wear pastel shades, 'Gothic Lolitas' wear black. Neither sub-style need be explicitly sexual, despite the 'Lolita' name.

New Rock: Spanish footwear brand founded in 1978 – not the highest-end, but most ubiquitous shoemaker to the Goth world, typified by towering soles and cascades of laces and/or buckles.

The Office: the public prayer of the Church, enjoined on every ordained person to say daily. In the Church of England it consists of the two services of Morning and Evening Prayer.

Steampunk: an aesthetic which re-imagines the present through a fantasised version of the past, specifically a Victorianish world in which technology continues to be powered by steam. It has a troubled

relationship with Gothic, which also involves raiding the past for dressing-up ideas.

Tat-queen: Clergyman (has to be male, really) with an inordinate fondness for vestments.

Thurible: thing on chains you burn incense in and swing about.

Tractarians: the founders of the movement in the 19th-century Church of England that sought to rediscover the Catholic side of its identity, so-called because they publicised their ideas through short treatises, or Tracts.

Tradgoth: One who adopts the styles associated with the early years of the Goth movement in the early 1980s.

Sit on down and set me up, and I'll lay it on the line
See, my rhyme done lost its reason, and my rhythm's out of time
And my cup be nearly empty now, and my spirit nearly worn
And my make-up smeared and tragic, and my stockings tatter-torn

I have spoke the tongues of Babel, and I've scaled the walls of Hell
And I thought that I'd found Heaven, but it was just another bar …
And though my heart be heavy now, and chaos like a friend
'Til I've stormed the gates of Paradise this journey will not end –

So take me, take me over,
Take me through this night
Take me by the hand and guide me
From the darkness to the light

I have singed the wings of angels, and I've stol'n the crowns from kings
I have mouthed the words of righteousness with my mind on 'other things'
I have drunk the lesser spirits in the homes of better men
And I've courted all temptation, and I've catalogued each sin

I have cruised my way down Sex Street with the gorgeous and the vain
And I've freshened up my make-up on the boulevard of pain:
And though I've been around the block, and been around again,
'Til I've stormed the gates of Paradise this journey will not end –

So take me, take me over,
Take me through this night
Take me by the hand and guide me
From the darkness to the light

And if y'all want to love me, let me just hip you up before:
Though there's half a chance I'll love you back, it's Him that I live for –

\- Little Annie, 'Sit On Down'

St Michael's, Camden Town


umbra