3. COMPASSION

"Abort it and try again. It would be immoral to bring it into the world if you have the choice."

— Richard Dawkins, 2014

The advice came in 2014 from the eminent biologist and the world's most famous atheist, Richard Dawkins. The occasion was a question on Twitter from a woman who said that discovering Down's syndrome in any future pregnancy would present her with "a real ethical dilemma": whether to abort or not.

Dawkins' clear-eyed exhortation, offered without hesitation, cut through the questioner's qualms and attracted an onslaught of online outrage. Comparisons with eugenics and Nazi ideology were swift in coming, and, as is often the case in these incidents, the subsequent apology only made things worse. Dawkins clarified that he was only advising a course of action which the great majority of parents in this position do in fact take. He could have added that his advice would have found hearty approval from the ancient world.

Plato thought that in order to be worth rearing, children must be "malleable, disposed to virtue and physically fit".[21] If they did not prove themselves worthy, parents

21 A summary of Plato's teaching from Darrel W. Amundsen in "Medicine and

would "properly dispose of [them] in secret, so that no one will know what has become of them."[22] Aristotle thought defective children should be exposed—that is, discarded at rubbish tips, abandoned on hillsides, thrown down wells or drowned in rivers. "As to exposing or rearing the children born, let there be a law that no deformed child shall be reared."[23] In other words, it would be immoral not to do this. Infanticide was so widespread in the Roman world (in fact, in all the world) that the first known treatise on gynaecology included the vital section "How to Recognise the Newborn That is Worth Rearing".[24] If they did not make the grade, the advice was "Expose it and try again".

Around the world and down through history the vast majority of cultures have considered that we are all better off without the weak. In our own society, advanced technology means that recognition and disposal of so-called "inferior offspring" can happen ever earlier, *in utero* even. But the furore over Richard Dawkins' position points to a deep instinct within us. Even when, nowadays, we seek and destroy the disabled as secretly and clinically as possible, we nevertheless cannot escape feeling that

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the Birth of Defective Children: Approaches of the Ancient World" in *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics,* edited Stephen E. Lammers and Allen Verhey (Eerdmans, 1998), p 682.

22 Plato, *Republic,* Book 5, p 460. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0168%3Abook%3D5%3Apage%3D460. Accessed 29th October 2021.

23 Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 7, section 1335b.

24 Soranus of Ephesus (98-138) wrote a chapter "On the Care of the Newborn", which begins with the section "How To Recognise the Newborn That is Worth Rearing", in *Gynecology* (trans. Owsei Temkin, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p 79.

our moral imperative is to protect the weak, not eliminate them. Where does this come from?

THE POISON OF PITY

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) identified the culprit in his book *The Anti-Christ*. The problem, according to the German philosopher, was the poison of pity. "Pity on the whole thwarts the law of evolution, which is the law of selection."[25] In other words, nature selects the strong and eliminates the weak. Who are we to disobey this law—a law that has given us life?

Notice how, for Nietzsche, the word "law" does double duty. It is both a description of biological reality and a prescription for ethical living. If the fittest do survive (a scientific law), then the fittest *should* survive (a moral law). Nietzsche called this resolve to follow the law of evolution, "the first principle of our philanthropy". Philanthropy is the love of humanity. Nietzsche believed he was loving humanity best by identifying and enforcing the realities of natural selection. "The weak and ill-constituted shall perish" Nietzsche decreed before adding, "and one shall help them to do so".[26]

If we recoil from such ruthless behaviour, (and Nietzsche knew we would), it's only because we are captive to "life's nausea": in other words, Christianity.

> *"Christianity has taken the part of all the weak, the low, the botched; it has made an ideal out of antagonism to*

25 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ,* Aphorism 7. Found in *Writings of Nietzsche*, Col. 1, edited Anthony Uyl (Devoted Publishing, 2016), p 122.

26 As above, p 121.

all the self-preservative instincts of sound life."[27]

To translate, Christians have put themselves on the side of the inferior, endangering the survival of the species. What is worse, from Nietzsche's point of view, is that they have disguised this betrayal of humanity as a virtue. As he says elsewhere, Christianity is "disgust with life … dressed up as faith".[28] Christians oppose the self-preservation of humanity, they oppose its evolution towards greatness, and then they have the audacity to call this an "ideal". Surely the "sound" course of action is to protect ourselves from "the botched"? Yet Christians intervene with their anti-life, unnatural ethic of compassion.

Nietzsche was correct to identify Christianity as the champion of pity in our midst. It is Christianity that informs our instincts regarding the protection and nurture of the weak. Without the Jesus movement, it is difficult to imagine Richard Dawkins' tweet prompting much more than "Thx. Will do. xx"

But if we want to listen more closely to our moral sensibilities here, if we want to avoid Nietzsche's conclusions regarding the weak and "botched", if we consider pity a virtue and not a weakness, and if we reckon that the best societies protect their weakest members (rather than eliminate them), we will need to erect the strongest firewall between scientific law and moral law. That is, we will need to keep science as science and morality as morality.

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27 As above, p 122.

28 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Random House, 1967), p 23.

Deriving the latter from the former is fraught with trouble. Science observes the ruthless winnowing of the weak and the favouring of the strong. If this is the way of nature, what reason can we give for behaving any differently? "There is nothing particular about man. He is but a part of this world," said Heinrich Himmler, the chief architect of the Holocaust.[29] If we are simply a part of nature—and if there is nothing above nature—then what can we do but live according to nature? And we know what nature does: it selects the strong and discards the weak.

To avoid such genocidal conclusions, we need a morality that is beyond nature, above nature—something super-natural, you might say. And in history there has been a unique movement that transcends the brutal laws of nature. If natural selection means the survival of the fittest and the sacrifice of the weakest, Christianity is about the sacrifice of the Fittest (Jesus Christ) for the survival of the weakest (us). It is a moral revolution, confounding the Nietzsches of the world and giving hope to the "botched". The centre of this revolution is a unique vision of God.

TO IMAGE GOD

"What does it look like when God shows up?" This was the title of a sermon I preached as a guest speaker at an unfamiliar church. They clearly possessed a zealous publicist because when I arrived, there stood outside

29 Heinrich Himmler, quoted by Tom Holland in *Dominion* (Little, Brown, 2019), p 521.

the building a large sign with the words "What Does It Look Like When God Shows Up?" So far so good. Unfortunately, next to the question there appeared—as if by way of an answer—a picture of my face. This could only be a profound disappointment to people. Or a blasphemy. Does God look like a middle-aged Australian with a crooked nose? If not, then what does God look like? Or, to put it another way, what could possibly be an *image* or *likeness* of God?

If you had asked someone from the ancient Near East, they might have answered, "The king". After all, the deities were themselves despotic tyrants. If you had asked a Greek philosopher, "What images God?" they might have replied, "The universe". Plato imagined that the world we see is a shadowy image cast by an original divine light.

But with the Bible in hand, the answer to the question "What images God?" is extraordinary: us. As we saw in the last chapter, human beings, both male and female, bear the image and likeness of God. It's not really that God is like us, it's that we are like God. Here, on page one of the Bible, lies a treasure more valuable than all the world because we are said to be more valuable than all the world. This is a status given not according to a person's strength, rank, race or gender but simply on account of belonging to the human family.

According to the Bible, Heinrich Himmler was wrong. We are more than "a part of this world"; we have dominion over the world. Humanity was made to stand between heaven and earth—commissioned from above to care

for that which is below. The kindness of God therefore flows down and out.

"Down and out" describes the direction of travel for God's love, but it's also a good description of its typical recipient. Later in the Bible story, when God comes to select his "chosen people"—the ancient Israelites—he makes sure to underline his reasons:

> *"The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you … and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt." (Deuteronomy 7:6-8)*

God loved helpless Israel, and his love met them precisely when they were "down and out" in Egypt. Israel's redemption from slavery, known as the exodus, was the definitive act of the Old Testament. In delivering the people from their captors and bringing them through the Red Sea, God was saving a despised and helpless people from the superpower of their day, and delivering them into the promised land—a land "flowing with milk and honey".

He did not do this because they were more impressive or worthy than others. He loved the loveless to make them lovely and to make them bearers of his love to the world. Compassion drove it all. This is the pattern for all of God's activity in the Bible: compassion that flows "down and out". And it flows *to* the "down and outs". It meets

the people in their weakness and then raises them up so they might share the blessings far and wide.

As the Hebrew Bible (also known as the "Old Testament") continues, we see the way in which God works decisively through the "down and outs". While other nations would boast in their kings, precious few of Israel's heroes were kings, and precious few of their kings were heroes. Even their very best rulers (David and Solomon) were known as much for their failures as for their feats. Other armies would boast in their battles; Israel was a minnow whose greatest victories were won with slingshots, trumpets and tent pegs (1 Samuel 17; Judges 7; Judges 4). Other kingdoms would sing of their greatness; Israel's songs were full of their faults. To seek glory and greatness was, for many in the ancient world, the very meaning of their existence. In contrast the Jews were told by their God, "Do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not" (Jeremiah 45:5, ESV). Among the jostling empires of the world, Israel was, on every level, an enigma.

From the 8th century BC to the 1st, the Israelites were swallowed up and spat out by superpower after superpower—the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Medes and Persians, the Greeks and then the Romans—yet they never lost the sense that they were God's chosen agents of redemption and hope. As "people of the book", they possessed something—the instructions and the promises of God—which could never be destroyed. And in the fullness of time, the promise of all promises would appear: the Messiah.

Isaiah (c. 8th century BC), along with many other

prophets, spoke of this coming king—the "anointed one" who had been chosen to reign (the Hebrew word is "Messiah"; the Greek word is "Christ"). In chapter 61 we read one of many prophecies where Isaiah anticipates the Messiah's words:

"The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives,
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour."

(Isaiah 61:1-2)

Here was the deepest hope of God's people: the coming of the Messiah—compassion incarnate.

COMPASSION INCARNATE

When he arrived, the Messiah both fulfilled and defied expectations. The long-awaited King looked nothing like the kings we are used to. For one thing, Jesus was a nobody from a nowhere town. To place him in an equivalent modern setting, Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, asks us to imagine a car mechanic from Basra during the US occupation of Iraq.[30] Let's develop the analogy: Jesus is like a car mechanic who preaches peace to all sides of the conflict and ends up tortured to death in Abu Ghraib, the notorious detention centre. In fact, let's develop the analogy even further: Jesus is like an Iraqi

30 Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Canterbury Press, 2007), p 68.

torture victim left to rot in a forgotten hell hole, who, soon after his shameful death, is worshipped as the Lord and Saviour of the world. He's *that* kind of torture victim.

Everything the New Testament tells us about Jesus' life screams paradox. He was the divine Word of God, who spoke with a much-scorned northern accent (John 1:1; Matthew 26:73). He was the cosmic King, who took the form of a slave (Philippians 2:7). He was the Maker of the world, whose day job was making furniture—until one day, aged 30, he put away the hammer, took up a scroll and preached to a small-town congregation. His inaugural address was a sermon from Isaiah 61 (the quotation above). Upon finishing the reading he told them all, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

The claim was stratospherically lofty: he considered himself the fulfilment of prophecy, the bringer of good news, the healer of broken hearts, the liberator of the oppressed—in short, the Messiah. The audience, for their part, tried to kill him, and Jesus had to escape an early martyrdom. This was how it went for Jesus for the next three years until his enemies finally (and literally) pinned him down. He brought a message of hope and reconciliation while his hearers brought hostility and rejection. It's a clash which Jesus met, characteristically, with "compassion".

In the Gospels (the biographies of Christ's life), the word that describes Jesus' emotional life more than any other is "compassion". The authors had to reach for an odd Greek word to describe his depth of feeling: a verb form

of the word for "intestines". When describing love, we moderns speak romantically of "the heart", but ancient people knew that the deepest feelings are experienced in our innards. And such stomach-churning pity was so obvious in Jesus that the Gospel writers continually spoke of it. When he brought healing (Matthew 20:34), restoration (Mark 1:41), or new life (Luke 7:13), we are told that he was moved with [gut-level] compassion. When he placed himself as a character in his parables (his spiritual stories), he made sure to reveal his inward motivations. Like a merciful ruler forgiving an enormous debt, like a merciful father restoring a wretched son, like a good Samaritan rescuing a dying man, Jesus is full of gut-wrenching love: "compassion" (Matthew 18:27; Luke 15:20; 10:33).

That last parable, the Good Samaritan, is perhaps Christ's best known (Luke 10:25-37). It tells of a man left for dead by robbers. Two religious leaders walk by on the other side of the road. Only a despised Samaritan (a man from another nation and religion) is moved with compassion. He stops, stoops, cares for the man and carries him to a make-shift hospital, paying for the full treatment of this stranger. It's a picture of Christ's own stooping love. It's also a challenge to all who would follow him: "Go and do likewise" (v 37).

Compassion describes the life of Christ, and it's meant to describe the life of the Christian. But these were incredibly strange ideas to Roman ears. We might be familiar with the idea that God loves the world (whether or not we believe in God or his love), but the historian Larry Hurtado calls the notion, "utterly strange, even ridiculous … in the Roman

era."[31] We take for granted the idea of a "love ethic", but historians "simply do not know of any other Roman-era religious group in which love played this important role in discourse or behavioral teaching".

Roman religion was different. They already had a "son of God": the emperor. Caesar Augustus (27 BC – AD 14) was called "Lord", "Saviour of the world" and "Son of God". The "God" whose son he was (by adoption) was Julius Caesar, whose claims to divinity included killing a million Gauls and enslaving a million more. (For Gaul, think France.) That was Caesar's boast, anyway. But, whatever the true figure, we should note that it was considered a boast and not a blemish. Here was evidence of his greatness—indeed of his godness.

Christ's brush with imperial power was the polar opposite. At the crucifixion, as a spear was thrust into Christ's side to finish the job, we see two very different pictures of greatness. At one end of the spear was a centurion, enforcing imperial might. At the other end was Jesus, a despised but innocent victim of injustice.

So at which end of the spear is true greatness to be found? Glory? Power? The apostle Paul spoke for all Christians when he declared that *Jesus* was "the image of the invisible God … making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Colossians 1:15, 20). According to the Bible, you've never seen anything more divine than that crucified man. Here is love at full strength: the highest ruler plunging to the deepest depths in order to

31 Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods* (Baylor University Press, 2017), p 64-65.

embrace the world. In peacemaking sacrifice, with arms outstretched even to his enemies, this is what it looks like to be God.

COMPASSION SHARED

With such a picture of "compassion incarnate" at its heart, it's no surprise that the Jesus movement sought to learn from the good Samaritan and "go and do likewise". Care for the sick became a characteristically *Christian* thing.

Medical care did not, of course, originate with Christians. The Greeks had their physicians and manuals. The Romans had their "sick bays" for slaves and soldiers. But such sick bays existed in order to return the injured to economic and military usefulness. Christians, following the lead of the good Samaritan, developed something new: healthcare for all. The religious scholar David Bentley Hart gives a sketch of the early development:

> *"St. Ephraim the Syrian (A.D. c. 306-373), when the city of Edessa was ravaged by plague, established hospitals open to all who were afflicted. St. Basil the Great (A.D. 329-379) founded a hospital in Cappadocia with a ward set aside for the care of lepers, whom he did not disdain to nurse with his own hands. St. Benedict of Nursia (A.D. c. 480 – c. 547) opened a free infirmary at Monte Cassino and made care of the sick a paramount duty of his monks. In Rome, the Christian noblewoman and scholar St. Fabiola (d. A.D. c. 399) established the first public hospital in Western Europe and—despite her wealth and position—often ventured out into the streets personally to seek out those who needed care. St. John Chrysostom (A.D. 347-407), while patriarch of*

Constantinople, used his influence to fund several such institutions in the city."[32]

This care for the poor and sick was headed up by church leaders. Charity was considered integral to the faith and to the duties of each Christian, with the bishops leading the way. They presided over "mini welfare states", with their size and infrastructure further growing after the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in 312.[33]

From the 5th century there was, to use medievalist James William Brodman's phrase, a "cascade of hospitals".[34] In the Middle Ages, just the monastic order of the Benedictines alone were responsible for more than 2,000 hospitals in western Europe.[35] These movements were thoroughly and particularly Christian. Today, if you need first aid, look for a white cross on a green background—the internationally recognised sign. If you're in a crisis, it's the "Red Cross" which millions turn to—a charity whose strapline sounds suspiciously like a summary of Jesus' famous parable: "Refusing to ignore people in crisis". The good Samaritan lives. In fact nowadays the good Samaritan is assumed.

But there's nothing natural about this. Nature is "red in tooth and claw", as the poet Tennyson put it.[36] Compassion comes from another realm. It is, in a real sense, "super-natural".

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32 David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions* (Yale University Press, 2010), p 30.

33 Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual* (Penguin, 2015), p 81.

34 Quoted in John Dickson, *Bullies and Saints* (Zondervan, 2021), p 191.

35 David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions* (Yale University Press, 2010), p 30.

36 "In Memoriam A.H.H" (1850).

SUPER-NATURAL

I realise that word might put some people off. *Who, these days, believes in the "supernatural"?* Where's the evidence? But belief in the supernatural is everywhere. It is evident in every objection to Richard Dawkins' tweet. It is at work whenever we recoil from Nietzsche's pitiless philosophy. It appears whenever Jesus Christ is considered a superior model of greatness to Julius Caesar. If you reckon there are values like compassion that are above and beyond "the law of selection" and that those should take precedence in the event of a clash, then you believe in the supernatural. And at that point the Christian comes along and says, *Where is your evidence?*

For what it's worth, here is some of the evidence a Christian might cite for *their* view: in the 1st century some remarkable values were injected into a brutal world—values that continue to shape us today. These values had been prefigured in the Hebrew Bible, but something happened to make compassion burst the banks of Israel and begin to flood the world.

Christians have an explanation for this. We say that kindness appeared in the world because Kindness *himself* appeared—kindness enfleshed (Titus 3:4). Jesus is Pity with a capital P. He entered the pitiless realm of nature and suffered its brutalities. Yet in love, he chose the cross. And it was on the cross that Christ, the Fittest, was sacrificed for us, the weakest, so that we, the weakest, might survive—more than that, that we might be raised up, forgiven and filled with the life of his Spirit.

This is the message that birthed the Jesus movement of the 1st century. Naturally, human movements will be based on human achievements and distinctives. But this is a movement of the Spirit, and it operates on a "down and out" basis, using whatever strengths it receives to serve those without them.

What does such a movement look like? Jesus spelt out the distinctiveness to his earliest followers:

> *"You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles [the non-Jewish nations] lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man [that is, Jesus himself] did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45)*

Today we take it for granted that "lording it over others" is a bad look. Among management consultants, "servant leadership" is so commonplace as to be clichéd. Facebook memes abound declaring, "A society should be judged by the treatment of its weakest members". And in many a Christianised country we call our leaders "ministers"—literally it's the old English for "servant". In the UK, our chief governor is called the *prime* minister—first in the queue to minister to us. If you want evidence of the Christian revolution, look no further: our rulers used to pronounce themselves "Gods"; now they are servants.

Of course, the leaders themselves have a very mixed record as regards their Christ-like compassion. Their

people likewise struggle. But the values by which we judge them remain. Kindness has caught on.

GLADIATORS, GARBAGE DUMPS AND GOD

> *"You do not attend our shows, you take no part in the processions, you are not present at our public banquets, you abhor the sacred [i.e. gladiatorial] games."*[37]

This complaint, addressed to the first Christians, was typical of the way Roman citizens felt about the burgeoning Jesus movement. Christians were a maddening mystery. They boycotted blood sports, they shunned displays of civic worship, and they refused to worship the emperor (since Christ alone is Lord). For this the Romans considered them enemies of humanity, and so while Christians would refuse to *attend* the gladiatorial games, sometimes they would become the entertainment: fed to the beasts. As they died, though, with dignity and determination, the thousands who came to see one kind of glory got a glimpse of another. In the arena, the violence of empire was met by sacrificial love. Christ's way of the Spirit flowed on.

It took until AD 401 for the games to be finally outlawed by an edict of the Christian emperor Honorius. (As we will see, spiritual realities take time to be grasped by individuals and churches, and they can take centuries to take root in rulers and empires.) Nevertheless, as historian William Lecky has argued, "There is scarcely any reform

37 Marcus Minucius Felix, *Octavius 12*, quoted in Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization* (Zondervan, 2001), p 25.

so important in the moral history of mankind as the suppression of the Gladiatorial games, a feat that must be almost exclusively ascribed to the Christian Church."[38]

Fittingly, the story surrounding their abolition involved a martyr. Emperor Honorius was moved, so it was said, by the efforts of a monk named Telemachus, who entered the arena one day with the goal of stopping the slaughter. The monk stood between the gladiators but was stoned to death by the angry crowd. There is power, though, in sacrifice—power to overturn fear and violence. As his example sank in with the masses and as his story reached the ears of the emperor, so there came a revolution. As with the Lord whom he followed, Telemachus' bloodshed was turned to blessing, his sacrifice changed hearts, his death made peace, and his martyrdom proved victorious.

A similar story can be told about ending the exposure of infants. Once again the early Christians made known their implacable opposition to the practice, and at the same time they demonstrated sacrificial love in addressing it. Right from the beginning the early church took up collections for the poor and sick, not just their own but those of the surrounding culture. Such charitable giving beyond the family and beyond the clan was extremely rare in the ancient world. In time, the bishops of the early churches presided over their "welfare distribution centres", with hospitals and orphanages rising up to meet the needs.[39] It was this combination of word and deed

38 Quoted in Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, §95. https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc2.v.x.viii.html. Accessed 30th October 2021.

39 John Dickson, *Bullies and Saints* (Zondervan, 2021), p 33-36, 74-76.

which later saw legislation catching up. In the late 4th century, the Christian emperor Valentinian I made it a law that parents rear their own children, and he forbade the killing of an infant. But culturally what made the enduring difference was not the changes in law but the changes in hearts. A new kind of heroism had gripped the world. It was evident in monks like Telemachus or nuns like Macrina (330–379), whose life of radical generosity included touring the rubbish dumps to rescue exposed infants and adopt them into her community.

These were the stories that captured the imagination because at the heart of the faith was the original Martyr, the stooping God. He is the kind of God who descends to the garbage dump (that was, after all, where the Romans would routinely set up their crucifixions). And this wasn't just an Easter reality. Jesus pointed his followers to the starving, the immigrant, the sick and the imprisoned, saying, *Whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me* (Matthew 25:40).

What was Macrina looking for in the garbage dump? The deepest answer is God. And in among "the weak, the low and the botched", she, and the many she's inspired, found him.

It turns out the supernatural really does show up, and when it does, it looks exactly like sacrificial love.

4. CONSENT

"How much is a little girl worth?"

— Rachael Denhollander, 2018

Rachael Denhollander was the last of 169 women to give her victim-impact statement. Years earlier she had been among the first to go public about serial sexual predator Larry Nassar.

Nassar had abused at least 265 girls over the course of decades as a medical professional. As the team doctor for USA Gymnastics he used his position to exploit women and girls in his care. But as the judge considered sentencing, Denhollander, a survivor of Nassar's abuse and an attorney in her own right, wanted the court's attention drawn to one question: "How much is a little girl worth?"

As she concluded her extraordinary 37-minute testimony, she addressed the judge:

> *"Judge Aquilina, I plead with you as you deliberate the sentence to give Larry, send a message that these victims are worth everything … I plead with you to impose the maximum sentence under the plea agreement because everything is what these survivors are worth. Thank you."*[40]

40 "Read Rachael Denhollander's Full Victim Impact Statement about Larry Nassar", CNN, 30th January 2018. https://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/24/us/rachael-

Soon after Denhollander's statement, the judge imposed multiple prison sentences on Nassar of between 40 and 175 years, in addition to the 60-year sentence he had already received. "I just signed your death warrant," said the judge, acknowledging that Nassar would never again walk free. The message was sent: girls—victims, survivors, the vulnerable—are worth *everything*.

It should be said that the justice system rarely delivers this kind of verdict on behalf of survivors. In the UK, it is estimated that for every 200 reports of rape only three make it to trial.[41] But there is, at least, an expectation that Denhollander's question will provoke serious soul searching. How much is a little girl worth? We want to answer, *"Everything"*. The fact that 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men will experience sexual abuse before the age of 18 breaks our hearts. Paedophilia is regarded as the most dreadful crime and, among prisoners, sex offenders are considered the lowest of the low. While today these attitudes are considered to be some of the most basic, universal and obvious values imaginable, they are, historically, nothing of the sort.

If you asked a Roman, "How much is a little girl worth?", they might have offered a number of answers. She's free if you manage to salvage her as a baby from the rubbish heap where she was exposed. If slave-traders got to her first, then you'd have to pay them perhaps eight

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denhollander-full-statement/index.html. Accessed 10th November 2021.

41 "Just 1.5% of all rape cases lead to charge or summons, data reveals", the Guardian, 26th July 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/law/2019/jul/26/rape-cases-charge-summons-prosecutions-victims-england-wales. Accessed 30th October 2021.

month's wages to own her.[42] Once yours, though, her body belongs to you outright: "It is accepted that every master is entitled to use his slave as he desires."[43] If, though, you wanted a girl purely on a pay-as-you-go basis, prostitution was, in the words of historian Kyle Harper, "a dominant institution, flourishing in the light of day. The sex industry was integral to the moral economy of the classical world."[44] A quick visit to the nearest brothel (and they were everywhere), would set you back the price of a loaf of bread.[45]

So how much is a little girl worth? We answer, "Everything". Others in history would laugh at us, all the way to the brothel. Why the difference? In a word: Christianity.

INVENTING ABUSE

A number of Christians have been found guilty of horrendous sexual crimes in the last 20 centuries. Some have gained the headlines, while others have not, and sometimes the cover-ups have been as diabolical as the abuse. But there is more than one sense in which Christianity has brought abuse into the world. The Christian revolution has given us the category for sexual abuse—a category that was unknown to the culture in which Christianity first spread. Kyle Harper writes of the Roman world, "The complete, violent exploitation of

42 *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity*, American Philosophical Society (William Linn Westermann, 1957), p 100.

43 Quoted in Tom Holland, *Dominion* (Little, Brown, 2019), p 99.

44 Kyle Harper, *Shame to Sin* (Harvard University Press, 2016), p 3.

45 As above, p 49.

women without any claim to civic protection was simply, as a problem in its own right, invisible."[46] In other words, our modern concept of sexual abuse would be nonsensical to a freeborn Roman man since he considered that he held an unquestioned right to the bodies of lower-status women, children, prostitutes and slaves. What we might call "abuse" was, to his mind, the obvious *use* for sex.

"In the sexual life of the Roman Empire, it would be impossible to overstate the decisive influence of social position in the determination of sexual boundaries."[47] It was the status of your partner—not their consent, their age or their gender—that mattered. And it was your reputation within a shame-based culture that determined the rightness of an encounter, not any inherent wrongfulness regarding particular acts. It was, to use Harper's phrase, a world of shame, not of sin. What mattered was "loss of face" rather than violation of a law, still less of a body. If your partner was already degraded socially—and who was not the inferior of a male Roman citizen?—they could not themselves suffer loss. They were fair game.

Certainly some people were off limits—highborn women and wives had to have their chastity protected at all costs. There was a flagrant and unapologetic double standard for men and women. Even the key word regarding sexual morality—"modesty"—meant something different depending on your gender. For a woman "modesty" meant faithfulness within marriage and virginity before

46 As above, p 8.

47 As above, p 8.

it (though they would not have to wait long—marriages at the age of 12 were common). A man was expected to honour the modesty of those women who possessed it. (Slaves and prostitutes naturally lacked this virtue.)

All this meant that adultery—sleeping with another man's wife—was a very serious crime, but it was not a crime of passion. Given the free availability of sex via the flesh trade, adultery was usually politically rather than erotically charged. It was a heinous slight against the husband and a transgression of the social order. The adulterer destroyed their own "sense of shame, orderly self-control, citizenship, neighborliness".[48] Men, therefore, were called to a certain moderation in their appetites. Indeed, that is what the word "modesty" meant for *male* sexual ethics—not chastity but self-control. What this meant in practice was that slaves and prostitutes were used frequently as a sop for the lusts of men so that they wouldn't indulge them with married women. A trip to the brothel might well be taken *in the name of* modesty—the male variety, anyway.

Some philosophers counselled more moderation than others. A reputation for self-control was important lest you invite the charge of "softness" or "effeminacy". Thus, the super-strict might exhort the super-virtuous to forswear all sex beyond procreation, as did the Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus. But all of this still assumed the classical outlook on sex, gender, status and bodies. Such teaching was not a challenge to the natural order; it was simply a challenge to certain men to exercise

48 As above, p 56.

impressive levels of self-control. And very few rose to the challenge. There is a reason why Latin has 25 words for a prostitute and none for a *male* virgin.[49] Those two facts were very much linked.

Tom Holland has summarised the prevailing outlook:

> *"Sex was nothing if not an exercise of power. As captured cities were to the swords of the legions, so the bodies of those used sexually were to the Roman man. To be penetrated, male or female, was to be branded as inferior: to be marked as womanish, barbarian, servile … In Rome, men no more hesitated to use slaves and prostitutes to relieve themselves of their sexual needs than they did to use the side of a road as a toilet. In Latin, the same word, meio, meant both ejaculate and urinate."*[50]

The very things that strike us as abusive—the power-plays, the inequality, the objectification, the clinical use of bodies and persons—were in fact presumed in the sexual morality of the day. It was business as usual. Then came the sexual revolution.

THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION

When we think of the "sexual revolution", our minds turn instantly to the 1960s. It was a time after contraception became available, and before AIDS emerged, when sex was made much less consequential, at least as regards pregnancy. The sexes were equalised. Women could

49 Joseph Henrich, *The Weirdest People in the World* (Penguin, 2020), p 167.

50 Tom Holland, *Dominion* (Little, Brown, 2019), p 99.

experience the same kinds of sexual licence as men had, and, in the aftermath, sex, marriage, the family, and much more underwent radical change.

Nineteen centuries before "the summer of love", another revolution in sexual values and practices was unleashed on the world—and its impact was even more transformative. That 1st-century sexual revolution has given the world certain understandings of sex, love, freedom, choice, the body, the family, gender and equality which remain operative today, even among those who consider themselves free from the church's strictures. But the relationship between these two revolutions is revealing. In many ways, "the swinging sixties" were the mirror image of that 1st-century revolution.

In the 1960s, there was a concern for gender equality, and so social taboos around female sexuality were relaxed. In the early church, there was a similar concern for gender equality, but the double standard was attacked from the other side. The church imposed restrictions on men—the same restrictions that had always limited women. If the revolution of the 20th century said, *Women can be as free as men*, the Jesus revolution had said, *Men must be as restricted as women*. Given the complete sexual dominance of men in the ancient world, the coup was as audacious as it was transformative.

LIVE LIKE EUNUCHS

If Christianity brought an earthquake in sexual morality, then Matthew 19 is the epicentre. The chapter begins with Israel's strictest religionists, the Pharisees, asking Jesus about divorce and remarriage. In the Roman world

divorce was easy. Among Jews there was debate about how difficult it should be. Jesus outflanked everyone with the strictest regime ever imposed on men.

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

> *"'Haven't you read,' he replied, 'that at the beginning the Creator "made them male and female," and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh"? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'" (Matthew 19:3-6)*

When Jesus references "the beginning", he is taking his hearers back to the Bible's first chapters: Genesis 1 and 2. Here, the phrase "one flesh" describes two things: a union of bodies (sex) and a union of lives (marriage). In the Bible, sex is marital and marriage is sexual. The one-flesh act (sex) belongs in the one-flesh union (marriage).

There is, therefore, an intense significance to sex on the human level. Our sexual partner should be our life partner. But Jesus adds a vertical dimension too. When speaking of marriage, he speaks of "what God has joined together". Apparently, what we do with our flesh is also *spiritual*. Our human partnerships are not just human. They matter to God.

Such teaching represents the death of "casual sex". It's also the death of easy divorce, and so Jesus' questioners press him by appealing to their ancestor Moses and the

laws he gave Israel in the Old Testament:

> *"'Why then,' they asked, 'did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?'*
>
> *"Jesus replied, 'Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.'"*
>
> *(Matthew 19:7-9)*

According to Jesus, not everything in the Old Testament represents the original intention of the Creator. There were, for instance, many examples of polygamy in the Hebrew Bible, even among prominent Israelites like Abraham or David. King Solomon had 1,000 concubines (that is, mistresses of a lesser status than wives). While such practices were the norm for elite men across global cultures, they are the exception in Scripture and are presented consistently as cautionary tales of strife and exploitation. Here in the New Testament, Jesus tells his hearers that some Old Testament practices—indeed some Old Testament *legislation*—were non-ideal. It was a concession to human stubbornness—"hardness of heart", as he puts it. But in his coming, Jesus has restored things to the original pattern as taught in Genesis 1 and 2: marriage is between one man and one woman for life. Divorce is allowed only for rare exceptions.

According to Jesus, then, sex has two possible meanings. Within marriage, sex is your body's way of (re-)making wedding vows: "till death us do part". Outside of marriage,

sex is taking a sledgehammer to a union forged by God himself. Here is an incredibly high (or some might say, "narrow") view of sex. How do Jesus' followers respond?

> *"The disciples said to him, 'If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.'"*
> *(Matthew 19:10)*

Jesus was followed by red-blooded men, including fishermen like Peter (who was married). But when these men heard that the marital doors were locked with no one getting out alive, they were horrified. Those who were married wished themselves unmarried. (We are not told how Peter's wife reacted when she heard about her husband's response here!) Those who were unmarried began backtracking on any matrimonial plans. This teaching is a strict curtailing of male sexual behaviour.

If we don't notice the strangeness of this view, it might be because we're unaware of what male sexual behaviour is like in the wild. Here's Joseph Henrich comparing us to other animals:

> *"From among our closest evolutionary relatives—apes and monkeys—guess how many species both live in large groups, like Homo sapiens, and have only monogamous pair-bonding? That's right, zero."*[51]

Marriage, the way we do it, is not natural. It's weird. And within human societies monogamy is almost as rare. But if marriage proves too much of a commitment, Jesus offers an alternative (but only one): *Live like a eunuch*.

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51 Joseph Henrich, *The Weirdest People in the World* (Penguin, 2020), p 258.

> *"Jesus replied, 'Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.'" (Matthew 19:11-12)*

A eunuch was a man without testicles, often forcibly castrated as a slave so as not to be a threat to the master's wives. Jesus says that those who do not embrace marriage can instead embrace this other calling: they can forsake sex altogether and serve undistractedly in the kingdom of God. Those are the options: lifelong monogamy or chaste singleness. There is no third option. As Kyle Harper puts it, in the original sexual revolution "all the world's diffuse erotic energy was to be cramped into one, frail, sacred union."[52]

Henrich calls this teaching the church's "Marriage and Family Program" (MFP). And its effects have been profound. Henrich identifies it as the biggest single contributor to the West's weird psychology and remarkable prosperity. In cultures where high-status men call the shots, they take all the women. This is terrible for the women and for the other men. The Marriage and Family Program redistributes sex and marriage across the sexes and across the classes. In theory anyone can find a mate (a difficult job if Solomon has all the women). This, in Henrich's analysis, "suppresses male-male reproductive competition" and "drains the … pool

52 Kyle Harper, *Shame to Sin* (Harvard University Press, 2016), p 163.

of unmarried men"[53]—a dangerous pool, full of self-styled "involuntary celibates", high on testosterone and low on responsibility. The MFP drastically reduces that pool and instead ties men to their women and their children—their sexual choices and the consequences of those choices. As men are bound to family life this acts naturally as a "testosterone suppression system", lowering the aggression of the male population. Henrich summarizes the effects of the MFP in terms reminiscent of Jesus' "eunuch" language: "The church, through the institution of monogamous marriage, reached down and grabbed men by the testicles."[54]

A HIGHER VIEW

Henrich's analysis is correct as regards the Marriage and Family Program. But questions remain. How did the church "reach down" to people when it did not occupy any cultural heights, certainly not for the first three centuries? Why did dominant men allow themselves to be so restricted? And how do we account for the "live like eunuchs" part of Christ's teaching? Henrich focuses on marriage and family. But Christ holds chaste singleness in even higher regard. In evolutionary terms, such singleness is a dead end. But Christians looked beyond biological realities to spiritual ones:

> *"Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you?" (1 Corinthians 6:19)*

The apostle Paul here speaks in breathtaking terms

53 Joseph Henrich, *The Weirdest People in the World* (Penguin, 2020), p 267.

54 As above, p 273.

about the dignity afforded to human bodies. In the ancient world, many bodies were considered like urinals. In the modern world, we may think of our bodies as playgrounds. But to imagine that our frail human bodies could be homes for God is to imbue the physical with incredible spiritual significance. When such sacred bodies come together, Paul reveals the very highest truth about marriage imaginable:

> *"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her … 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church." (Ephesians 5:25, 31-32)*

For Paul, the joining of a man and a woman in marriage points to something beyond it: the love story between Christ and his people. Just as Jesus has loved us and joined himself to us, so husbands and wives are to be joined together as a picture of this divine romance. Marital love is a proclamation of the most profound union.

For this reason, sex within marriage is heartily encouraged:

> *"Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again."*
>
> *(1 Corinthians 7:5)*

Notice the stunning idea of mutual consent brought into the bedroom. Such mutuality really did cut both ways. In the previous verse Paul begins by teaching something

that would have gained easy assent in the ancient world:

> *"The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband." (v 4)*

No one in Paul's day would have objected to this. But the next phrase represents a radical shift in the understanding of sex, marriage, men, women, bodies and choice:

> *"In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife."*
>
> *(1 Corinthians 7:4)*

The words "in the same way" represent a revolution. Paul is insisting on complete mutuality. The married couple are to belong to one another as equals. It's hard for us to appreciate how stunning this was. Today we take such mutual consent and commitment for granted. But we take it for granted now because it was radical then.

In the ancient world, the gods were violent rapists, sexual agency was solely in the hands of powerful men, and sexual misbehaviour consisted in the violation of reputations, not of bodies or wills. Into this world came the Christian revolution, where sex is painted on the canvas of divine romance and where two equals unite in a sacred and unbreakable bond. It might be true that the Marriage and Family Program ended up "grabbing testicles" (to use Henrich's phrase), but it could do so only because first it captured hearts.

SLAVES, WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Unsurprisingly the hearts captured by the Jesus movement were initially those most bruised by the

brutalities of the day. In the 2nd century, Celsus (a critic of Christianity whom we have already met) wrote that Christians "are able to convince only the foolish, dishonourable, and stupid, only slaves, women, and little children".[55] Yet what represented a sneer for Celsus was a boast for the early church. Historian Rodney Stark has wondered aloud "why *every* woman who heard about [Christianity] didn't become a Christian."[56] The church became a place of dignity, protection and provision for women. In 251 a bishop in Rome wrote to another in Antioch, pointing out that "more than fifteen hundred widows and distressed persons" were in the care of the local congregation (a congregation of about 30,000). Moderns look back on these congregations as "mini welfare states", but at the time the churches saw themselves as families. In the cosmic romance, those who consent to the committed love of Christ are united, marriage-like, to God's Son. They are thereby brought into the Father's household, calling on fellow Christians as brother and sister. In other words: they are family.

> *"In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."*
>
> *(Galatians 3:26-28)*

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55 From Origen, *Contra Celsum*, Book 3, Chapter 44, quoted in Michael J. Kruger, *Christianity at the Crossroads* (IVP Academic, 2018), p 34-35.

56 Rodney Stark in "Jesus the Game Changer Season One - Rodney Stark Extended Interview". https://youtu.be/3h2OnGUU1Uk, 7:00. Accessed 30th October 2021.

Within the church none are "lords" except Christ, and all are one. Regardless of race, rank or gender, all belong to the family of God. And as family, the beating heart of the church's ethic is love—a trait that floods the New Testament and early Christian writing, yet is barely mentioned in the classical virtue lists. Philosophers such as Plato or Cicero considered the foundational virtues to be wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation—traits well suited to the army barracks. In fact, the word "virtue" is closely related to the word "virile". Both come from the Latin word *vir*, meaning "man". Virtue was "manliness".

But Christ revealed a different kind of God and a different kind of man. He taught that the highest good was to love—to love God and neighbour, and even to love our enemies. And what is love? Paul penned one of the Bible's—indeed literature's—most famous passages:

> *"Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs." (1 Corinthians 13:4-5)*

These are not the slogans of the drill sergeant but the atmosphere of the healthy family home. And so, to bring this chapter full circle, we should consider one particular aspect of the church's family life: its treatment of children.

In the ancient world sex with boys and girls was not merely tolerated; it was celebrated by writers like Juvenal, Petronius, Horace, Strato, Lucian, and Philostratus.[57] The

57 Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods* (Baylor University Press, 2017), p 167.

word they used was *pederasty*: love of children. Christians were uniformly disgusted by the practice and called it by a different name—*paidophthoros*: destruction of children.[58] What the classical world called love, Christians called abuse, "thereby construing all sexual contact with the young as an act of corruption".[59] In the reign of the Christian emperor Justinian (527–565), pederasty was outlawed and could be prosecuted well after the abuse took place.[60] Here church and state—preaching and legislation—worked together as a one-two punch against the sexualisation of children.

Today, as "children of the revolution", we take for granted this revolution in our regard for children. The evil of child sexual abuse represents perhaps *the* moral certainty of our day. But our day needs setting in historical context. We view things on *this* side of the Jesus movement: "the single greatest breakthrough against child abuse".[61] Before and without Jesus, it is not always clear to people "what a little girl is worth".

CROOKED LINES ARE CROOKED

Towards the end of Rachael Denhollander's victim-impact statement, she addressed Larry Nassar directly:

> *"In our early hearings, you brought your Bible into the courtroom and you have spoken of praying for forgiveness…"*

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58 As above, p 167.

59 Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin* (Harvard University Press, 2016), p 98.

60 As above, p 13.

61 Paul Offit, *Bad Faith* (Basic Books, 2015), p 127.

As she is a Christian, we might have expected Denhollander to downplay or deny Nassar's professed faith. No one wants to claim the paedophile for their "side". But it's vital to grapple with this reality: those who claim a Christian identity have been among the worst abusers on the planet. Denhollander does not hide from this truth. All Christians acknowledge it is possible to claim the label and deny the transforming reality. As Jesus taught, we must watch out for vicious predators who masquerade as innocent believers: "wolves in sheep's clothing" (Matthew 7:15). But what Denhollander does is less about questioning Nassar's Christianity (though that is certainly appropriate too). Denhollander *applies* his avowed Christianity. She holds him to the standards he professes and the result is a blistering denunciation:

> *"The Bible you carry says it is better for a stone to be [hung] around your neck and you thrown into a lake than for you to make even one child stumble. And you have damaged hundreds."*

The words are from Jesus (Matthew 18:6), whose teaching birthed a revolution in the way children are regarded. Little girls and boys are worth everything. Jesus has taught us this. And, grotesquely, abusers like Nassar have taught us it too—though in photo-negative. The horror of his crime is a testament to the worth of his victims. It's also a testament to the values we hold dear. Denhollander put it like this:

> *"Throughout this process, I have clung to a quote by C.S. Lewis, where he says, 'My argument against God was that the universe seems so cruel and unjust. But how*

did I get this idea of just, unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he first has some idea of straight. What was I comparing the universe to when I called it unjust?'

"Larry, I can call what you did evil and wicked because it was. And I know it was evil and wicked because the straight line exists. The straight line is not measured based on your perception or anyone else's perception, and this means I can speak the truth about my abuse without minimization or mitigation. And I can call it evil because I know what goodness is."

After the horrors Rachael Denhollander has endured, we might expect her faith in God to be weakened. Instead Denhollander has pressed more deeply into that sense of injustice. It was the same for the author she cited: C.S. Lewis. In recognising the crookedness of this world, Lewis and Denhollander are pointing us to the straight line. If there was no such thing as a straight line, there would be no such thing as a crooked line either. Lines would simply be lines, and stuff would simply happen. But we know crooked when we see it. And we know evil when we see it.

Denhollander is able to call Nassar's acts evil. That does not mean unforgivable. She offered her abuser forgiveness in this same statement—a remarkably Christian action. But she extended forgiveness *because* the abuse was wrong: not just unpleasant or painful or culturally inappropriate. It was hellishly wrong. Wrong with a capital W. Yet if it really was Wrong, says Denhollander, then there is something that is Right with a capital R.

All this forces us to consider the standards by which we judge abuse. For abuse to be abuse we have to believe certain things: that bodies should be treated as temples; that sex is sacred; that children are valuable; and that the powerful should not exploit the weak but serve them. These values constitute the straight line against which we judge Nassar's actions as crooked. But such values are by no means universal. They are not the way that the animal kingdom operates, and they are not the presumptions of other human societies. They are Christian beliefs. Larry Nassar is not excused of his evils by claiming some kind of Christianity; he is accused by it. It is, very particularly, the goodness of Jesus that defines the evil of his abuse.

Sometimes we only realise what is important to us when it's threatened. And sometimes, tragically, it takes the violation of persons, of bodies, and of consent, to show us that these have been sacred values all along. But listen to your own heartfelt response when Denhollander asks, "What is a little girl worth?" You do not answer that question scientifically or economically. Nor do you answer it merely sociologically or psychologically. The deepest and truest answer to that question is a spiritual one. And when a guttural "Everything" rises up within you, that's your Christianity talking.