What! More God? In the previous chapter we considered how notions of God can provide sources of hope that lead to violent and aggressive action. Here we consider how notions of God can provide sources of hope that lead to lethal complacency.

Some of us do try to think long-term. We who do so tend to think by way of processes of extrapolation. We note how we labor compulsively to widen the scope of the dominant trends and habits, mindsets and ambitions of our society, both as these are realized in our individual lives and as they’re realized among us as achievements of the group. For instance, we think of the way we fund our government by borrowing, and we wonder how long we can get away with increasing deficits. Reagan famously achieved a kind of “morning in America”—still remembered fondly—by borrowing us into prosperity, and Bill Clinton found ways of continuing the good times by withdrawing restraints on the activities of banks and the stock market—restraints put in place during the Great Depression. Currently the Federal Reserve sustains our banking system by daily infusions of nearly interest-free cash. Again, we think of our unilateralism in foreign policy; we reflect on how we decide which political system to subvert, which foreign leader—duly elected or not—we see fit to replace, which country to invade (when, and for what reason), and on how we will attempt to reconcile the rest of what we call “the free world” to the choice we have made. We note how bitterly we complain when France, or Russia, or Europe in general seems recalcitrant. We note how we recently refrained from “French fries” and ate “freedom fries” instead. We wonder if there are any adults left in America. We note that in some parts of America
we are exhausting our groundwater and our aquifers and no one seems to have a plan for what to do about it; rather, some want to use the water left to us to carry out fracking. It occurs to us the extravagance with which we throw our weight around seems to have a connection with our mounting debts and depletion of resources. We seem never to have met a war we didn’t like; and where there is no war, we invent one, as we did in Iraq. One bad habit seems to feed the other. We live like a spoiled and brawling playboy, and those among us given to reflection wonder how long the synergy of this brawling and this borrowing against the future can hold up.

We think of our hoarding yet throwaway lifestyle. We wake up in the morning to invitations to guard our house with a state-of-the-art security system, to invitations to try a diet famous for miracles performed on imperfectly shaped celebrities, to invitations to reconfigure our drab backyard by installing a sparkling fresh-cut redwood deck, along with invitations to reconfigure our faces with a series of cosmetological interventions, including—but not limited to—surgeries. We live in perpetual unrest, besieged from dawn to dusk with admonitions as to what is newer, better, bigger, faster, and cheaper—and believe what we hear. Some of us are too restless to sit through a Thanksgiving meal. We replace our car, our cell phone, and our drab backyard. Our landfills bulge with our discards. Rather frequently, we replace our spouses. We use our rivers as toilets down which we flush the waste materials of our extravagant lives. On those occasions when we gaze at idyllic scenes of sailboats off which people fish in San Francisco Bay, we have to hope the happy sailors are too prudent to eat freely of their catch. An uneasy misgiving tells us nature has a way of striking back. In fact, the first half of the evening news is now regularly devoted to showing us how nature is currently doing so.

Politicians play to us on the hunch that many of us feel impoverished. But for millions of us, this is not precisely our plight. Rather we are too locked into a round-the-clock commercialism, and we feel stretched to our limit in our effort to keep up.

We see species on the brink of extinction. There are other species we do not see—they turn up missing. And we wonder what life on earth will be like without these fellow members of the biological web that spawned us.
As the climate warms, and old provisions of nature can no longer be counted on, we wonder too what accommodations will be necessary in some future sharing of declining, no longer reliably provided resources. Will we, backed by our nuclear arsenal and our permanent state of military readiness and activity, simply continue to utilize the share of things to which we’ve become accustomed? If so, what will this tenacious exercise of privilege cost in our relations with others? How ready will we be to exercise hospitality toward those whose homelands have become inhospitable as a result of the lifestyle we’ve exemplified?

In uses of water and land, in some places we already experience domestic tension within our borders between those who would retain traditional agricultural uses and maybe protect habitat for wildlife as well, and those who would trade such uses for further development of homes, malls, and factories. The homes may be needed for foreseeable numbers seeking refuge from more blighted areas; and the people who will live in these homes must have places where they can purchase the necessities of life, and they must have places where they can work to earn the purchase price of these necessities. Amid all this, we can easily forget that among these necessities are food and water, and as Malthus foresaw, our demands keep forging ahead as our agricultural and other food resources are thinning. (How come the price of crab is rising, and will oysters still be available as the chemistry of the oceans changes?)

What is the formula for adjudicating the conflicting claims? And what will the world look like if we do not calculate wisely? Can we really leave the calculation to an interplay of greed and the fine-tuning of an invisible hand? Will we Americans continue to have abundant sources of food? Will potable water continue to be generally accessible? Or will increasing demands and disruptions in our food and water systems reduce the quality of life for us as well as for those who live elsewhere? Has our evolutionary history installed in us such a tendency to consume that we are programmed to succeed into failure?

Time to take a deep breath.

I do not say all of us are spending our days on such considerations. Most of us are not. Quite a few of us are too busy tweeting our friends, responding to the latest commercials, worrying about
our eyelashes and face wrinkles, and wondering why this or that celebrity has slept with someone other than their spouse.

To a resolute secularist, I have not much to say about all this. Find within your resolute secularism what means you can to cope with it. For the remainder of this chapter, I address believers—people who believe there is some noble and transcendent purpose at stake in our human endeavor.

One should not despise this huge mass of us. As a people of great energy and creativity, it’s unlikely that we’re genuinely oblivious to the issues just mentioned. If we were, why demand so much from drugs, alcohol, and our storehouses of painkillers? Why elect to dwell in cyberspace?

More likely we simply can’t see what to do about these issues. In our workaday lives, we leave such problems to “experts” (special people to be hired and guided by our elected officials)—dreading, even as we do so, that members of that special and rare set from whom we choose our officials are more apt to draw profit from our problems than solve them.

And so the aforementioned pause for refreshment—that deep breath—renders up, does it not, a daunting scene?

Enter God.

What sometimes occurs to us as an alternative to all this dreary casting about is to turn all these matters over to God. This last isn’t simply a space-filler for careless people who don’t think often about these things; it’s a default position as well for some who do. Haven’t we been taught to accept the things we cannot change?

“God” as an answer has some plausibility.

I often think the most convincing evidence for God is the habitability of our planet. I know what I speak of isn’t really a proof at all, but more in the order of a notion, or perhaps an intuition. Here we are: emerging from nowhere—who knows how?—into a place that has characteristics of having been prepared for us. To be sure, the resolute secularist will protest: “That’s a mere truism. It’s a tautology. For earth would have to be accommodated to us for us to be here!” But I’m not precisely making an argument. The purpose here isn’t to make a case so much as to assess a situation. It’s as if one walked ashore on an unknown island and found the place hospitable. There was foliage with delightful hues, offering shade; there was birdsong and fresh water. Moreover, there was a library full of volumes well suited to entertain and inform one.
Throw in a candle, lit and shining, on a table spread with food. Coming upon such apparent provision, one would surmise the presence of a host. (I can hear my good friend Spinoza saying softly: surely you don’t want to go down this road; surely you’ll soon find yourself saying with Bacon, Descartes, and the Puritans that the whole value of nature is its mere utility for us!)

What I present here though is neither precisely an argument nor an agenda. I attempt an analogy for how human beings everywhere and from time immemorial have come to sense a sacred dimension to things, a divinity hovering over us that “shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.”

Granted the real-world correspondences there are to such provisions as those on our imaginary island, it seems unlikely to us humans that our host would have paid such attention to matters of detail simply so our habitation here would end in dismal failure. It’s on these grounds we hear devout people say: “God wouldn’t allow us to bring into the world more children than the world can handle” or “God wouldn’t let us destroy our environment!” or “God would never put so much power into our hands as to enable us to defeat His plan by nuclear catastrophe.” These are powerful messages.

They are “liberating” as well. As argued earlier, we often choose our thoughts for their convenience. The thoughts just cited tell us there’s no problem of overpopulation. There’s no real problem with the environment. It’s only those who look a gift horse in the mouth who worry about climate change or diminishing resources, or some danger of self-annihilation of the human species through our own weaponry. God would never let such things occur.

To our temptations to despair, these messages offer an inviting alternative. Why not adopt them as our answer? Why carry the world on our shoulder? Why not live, instead, in the comforting and reassuring glow they offer? Such messages invite us to sleep comfortably on this Greyhound bus called earth and leave the driving to God. Why say no to morning in America?

In truth, it’s very human to take this kind of thing to heart. And not just in America. When devout Hindus say “everything is maya,” they are, in a sense, going here. They’re saying, “God has not, in reality, let things reach anything like a cul-de-sac. We only think He has. The world we perceive is not the world that is.” When Muslims or Puritan Christians opt for predestination,
they are doing something similar. A thoroughgoing doctrine of predestination can take the worst horrors human history has contrived and see them as neither more nor less than what God in His eternal wisdom and goodness has decided to make happen. Such horrors are thereby sanctified as products of God’s will. The sting of such horrors has been removed.

A dispositive objection (one that gets the job done) to both these approaches—maya and predestination—is that they are in conflict with our deepest intuition of the actuality of the world and of our freedom of action within it. The Hindu sage who speaks of maya denies this world explicitly, telling us that all we experience is mere appearance; he is Plato on steroids. The proclaimer of predestination is less direct. Yet to deny a thing its proper agency (as those who believe in predestination do both regarding things in general, and particularly regarding human beings) seems finally to consign to oblivion the reality of everything but God. Common sense and our experience in general inform us that existence and agency are inextricably bound together. When the proponent of predestination says: “God has all the agency,” for such an advocate it follows: “Creatures have no agency at all.” In such a conception, we and the world about us are reduced to no more than mere characters and props in a divinely written script; the world collapses into a plaything of Divine imagination. (Contemporary Puritans have trouble with Darwin because of the immense agency he assigns to the physical universe. Good Calvinists want to reserve all that agency for God. Not only has God got the whole world in His hands, but—by the way—there actually is no world.)

The extreme test-case for such a perspective was the Holocaust. In Letters and Papers from Prison, the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, during the unspeakable anguish of the Third Reich, writes that we must live and act in the world “etsi Deus non daretur”—as if, that is, God did not exist. What had come home to Bonhoeffer was not atheism, but realism about the actuality of our world being a place where evil can take hold. He’d arrived at an irresistible insight into the actuality of evil. He found himself immersed in consciousness of its density and claim to being. While Aquinas and other medieval schoolman spoke of evil as a form of privation, they also anticipated Bonhoeffer by their insistence on what they called “secondary causality.” This
was the causality inherent in all creatures—the causality we humans exercise. While God causes the world and everything in it, Aquinas insisted that humans have by reason of their participation in being, a causality that is equally real, though altogether rooted in God’s sustaining gift of being. That this human causality can go unimaginably awry is the insight that came crashing down on Bonhoeffer.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, there was a brief surging and prominence of death-of-God theologies. The mood lingers on, though the slogan has retreated. Rather what the Holocaust should have led to was the death of predestination as a credible doctrine and to the demise of God-will-save-us-from-ourselves theologies.

As I suggest, in addition to monstrous events, what should further fortify us against an easy religious complacency is the spontaneous awareness, possessed by each of us, that we exist and each has demonstrable agency as a being who is not infinite. In our human case, although it’s a dependent agency dependent on the source of our being, it’s a very rich agency, richer it would seem than the everyday agency of rocks, or vegetables, or—it would seem—of the whole order of non-human animals.

If nothing else has sufficed, our daily experience of this rich human agency should lay to rest the notion “God will save us from ourselves.” God is not in the business of saving us from ourselves. God who created us with agency is not in the business of cancelling that agency.

Surely, there’d have been no point in creating each of us a “self” had it been our creator’s plan to save us from the inconveniences of being a self. In a very radical way—as the existentialists tirelessly insist—we are genuinely “on our own.” Yet this isn’t quite as atheist existentialists would have it. Contrary to Sartre, it seems it isn’t because of God’s absence we are on our own, but because God has the unimaginable power to give existence to what God conceives.1

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1. To say this is not to claim we creatures endure in existence without God’s sustaining action, but to say that by reason of God’s sustaining action, we really do exist and have an agency that is truly not God’s but ours. If this strikes one as a great mystery, well, welcome to the club.
For if God really is a creator, creation must, in a sense, be “on its own.” A notion therefore that one enhances one’s sense of God’s reality by declaring God the micro-manager of the universe is bad theology. It diminishes God—for it will not allow that God can create that which can stand against God and oppose God’s purposes; it denies nuclear physicist Ian Thompson’s assertion that God can create a rock he cannot move. As Thompson says, God did. That rock is us.

Calvin’s God doesn’t do this. The God of the Bible does. Calvin, one must conclude, is not a reliable reader of the Bible for Calvin cannot take in the opening lesson of the Bible’s teaching that God can create what really is not God.

If we’re real, if we’re intelligent being with the self-determination which intelligence entails, we can’t be such that our agency is magically suspended or swept away when it would get us into trouble. Though Leibniz and that kindest of men, Spinoza, would blissfully like to think otherwise, they are clearly wrong. They would reduce us to what we’ve noted we clearly are not: divinely designed toys for the play of divine imagination. (Whatever is wholesome in the writing of Nietzsche can, I think, be traced to this: his relentless insistence on the actuality and freedom of his own being.)

Because we are real, God cannot save us from ourselves. If God could, it would be in the ironic mode of the American pilot in Vietnam who remarked: “We had to destroy the village to save it.” A deliverance of that sort isn’t quite the deliverance we desire. Neither, it would seem, is it a deliverance God has ever intended.

While it’s a false hope to think “God will save us from ourselves,” nonetheless it does not seem in any way false to hope that God will somehow make available to us (indeed has made available to us) sources of direction and guidance amid the predicament and perplexities of human freedom.

Until quite recently, all peoples everywhere have had this hope always—that there is wisdom available to us; that within the miraculous, inexplicable gift of existence, some direction for our response and use of it is included; that there are indicated paths for success in the human project. When we speak of “conscience,” and “inspiration,” and “intimations,” we are addressing this. That different peoples have come up with different formulations doesn’t tell against such formulations having a common source
in that which holds the whole in being. A good physician suits the prescription to the patient. We wonderfully diverse humans do not lack prescriptions. (More particularly, consider how a recently silenced Catholic theologian Roger Haight has written that you cannot take seriously the vision Jesus provides of God as loving father—and mother—and then go on to believe that God would have rationed the revelation of human dignity and purpose to a mere subset of God’s human creatures.) Christians have often thought they, as missionaries to non-Christians, were the first agents of such revelation. But surely, as the Jesuit Roger Haight surmises, God has been there before them.

As suggested in the chapter on fundamentalism, what we must learn is to stop saying: “I’ve found the only guidepost!” We believers must learn not to be so enamored of our guidepost that we’re ready to use it as a stake through the heart of anyone who holds a different one. While God doesn’t save us from ourselves, God has provided abundantly, so that no one is without some means whereby to live meaningfully. An urgent part of our task is to learn how to avoid converting the means provided us into a weapon—to avoid making a sword of our guidepost. Better by far if our guidepost comes in the form of a plowshare, or a shovel for planting trees, or a pointer toward development of solar energy, or a formula for worldwide compassion.

To believe as some religious persons among us do that “no work of ours is conducive unto salvation” and to cry “Sola Gratia!”—only by God’s grace are we saved!—can be a path to thoughts of predestination and desperation. We echo then our Puritan ancestors. To say however “God is gracious” is to speak a saving truth—so long as one realizes God’s gracious initiative dies in us if we do not respond. While Luther is right about grace—namely, that we have need of grace (for we lack the means to place ourselves in God’s friendship)—Bonhoeffer’s truth supplies the necessary corollary: a grace that does not invite and summon us to an act of personal choice is cheap and spurious—no grace God would bother with.

God doesn’t save us from ourselves. It is the terror of the God-given human predicament that—with God’s help—to save us from ourselves is up to us. (See Kierkegaard. See Pogo. See the Greater Jihad—in which we struggle against ourselves, to surrender ourselves to Allah.)