



Avakian's
Away With All Gods!:

**CRITIQUING
RELIGION
WITHOUT
UNDERSTANDING IT**

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Cover: Woodblock print depicts armed peasants in Germany who were inspired to rebel against the land-holding Catholic clergy and aristocracy by radical Protestant theologian Thomas Müntzer in 1524. The banner shows the symbol of this *Bundschuh* movement — the peasants' tied shoe — a contrast to the buckled shoes of wealthy nobility.

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Avakian's *Away With all Gods!*: Critiquing Religion Without Understanding It

by Pavel Andreyev

High Expectations

It would be wrong to suppose that *Away With All Gods! Unchaining the Mind and Radically Changing the World* (Chicago, Insight Press, 2008) is just a book. It's in fact a *campaign* by some highly motivated people to promote atheism, and a certain critique of religion (including "Christian Fascism") in American life. Authored by the chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party, it has been advertised for months with great fanfare. The party, in a call to "Help Make this Book a Major Social Question," has declared:

There are many people who need this book, and many sectors of society which it must penetrate. In the communities of the oppressed and in the truly hellish prisons, where people are forced religion...in the high schools and universities, where atheist and agnostic clubs are beginning to emerge...among the educated and progressive, and among those hungering for enlightenment...this book must reach. April [2008] should be a time when this book emerges onto the scene with great impact.

Even the most significant and original contributions to religious studies are seldom publicized with this sort of (dare I say *religious?*) excitement. Party expectations are obviously high.

The targeted audience is vast, although the book blurbs including praise from at least four professors in different fields suggest the RCP wants the book to reach intellectuals in particular. It is not, however, a scholarly work. It offers no insights into the history of

the Abrahamic religions, and indeed makes mistakes and errors of omission in its discussion of them. It isn't likely to be reviewed in academic journals like the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, *Philosophical Review*, or *Rethinking Marxism*. The organization is choppy; Avakian skips from topic to topic, sometimes asking questions he answers perfunctorily or partially, only to return to later. This is not designed to be a scholarly discussion on the level, say, of Engels' "On the Early History of Christianity" published in 1894.¹ It's apparently supposed to be a popular, lively, in-your-face exercise in agitation. Committed to atheism and historical materialism, I myself am in principle totally sympathetic to the project. If I thought it was done well and effectively I would applaud it.

Like much of Avakian's material (or what the RCP reverently terms his "body of work"), it reads as a series of homilies; indeed, it is a re-editing of two talks given in 2004 and 2006. (It is also often self-referential, with long passages from a 1999 book *Preaching from a Pulpit of Bones* and other Avakian publications.)² The "significant amount of editing" the author performed (p. ix) deliberately includes bracketed indications of audience response to the talks. Some readers might find it off-putting when a passage that strikes them as less than amusing is followed by "[Laughter]"—but this informs us of what the author himself thinks is funny or ridicu-

1. *Die Neue Zeit*, vol. 1 (1894-5), translated into English by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, USSR in 1957 and available in *Marx/Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975-2005), vol. 27, 445-69.

2. *Preaching from a Pulpit of Bones: We Need Morality But Not Traditional Morality* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1999)

lous about religion, just in case there's any lack of clarity. But having noted that it's not an academic book, let's examine it seriously, following its somewhat chaotic order, with the sort of rigor that might occur in a journal review.

It is divided into four parts, with much overlapping material, as suggested by the titles:

Part One: Where Did God Come From...And Who Says We Need God?

Part Two: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—Rooted in the Past, Standing In the Way of the Future

Part Three: Religion—A Heavy, Heavy Chain

Part Four: God Does Not Exist—We Need Liberation Without Gods

Religion: a Bad Thing

Avakian's principle theses, simply stated, are that religion is a bad and harmful thing; that the Judeo-Christian and Islamic God described in the Bible and Qur'an is horrible (and Jesus too an unlikable figure); that Christian fundamentalism leads directly into Christian Fascism; that Christian Fascism is an immanent threat; and that atheism needs to be urgently propagated in order to liberate humankind.

Avakian begins — as so many have before him — with the observation that there are terrible tragedies in this world, and that some people unable to make sense of why they happen argue simply: "God works in mysterious ways." He lists natural disasters and accidents, proceeding to atrocities rooted in class society such as slavery and war. "How much of this has to go on," he asks, "and how long does it take, before it becomes clear that if such a god existed, it would indeed be a cruel, vicious, sick, twisted and truly monstrous god (p. 4)?" (Thus Avakian approaches what theologians call "the problem of evil," the problem of how to reconcile belief in a Creator—which for the record, some very sophisticated people like Albert Einstein have held—with the fact of suffering.)

Turning specifically to "the 'Judeo-Christian' scriptures," the author cites the biblical Second Book of Samuel, in which God smites Israel and Judah with a terrible epidemic.³ Since his discussion of this passage

is typical of the "method and approach" to follow, let's look at it in some detail.

King David is instructed by God to conduct a census; he orders a general to conduct it; the general questions the project for some reason but carries it out. He reports on how many military-age men the kingdom has available. (This suggests that the acquisition of this data was the purpose for the census.) David for some reason regrets having ordered the census, and apologizes to God for doing so. God, planning to punish David, gives him a choice of three penalties: famine, invasion or plague. The king opts for the latter and 70,000 die before God is satisfied and relents.

Serious Bible scholars find this a difficult text, because the story doesn't make much sense even within its own ideological framework. Why would God punish David for carrying out his order? It's been explained in various ways. Avakian, citing the *HarperCollins Study Bible* commentary, states that the king somehow botched the task: "...in conducting the census in the way he did, David made a big mistake, because...soldiers on active duty were subject to a strict regimen of ritual procedures in ancient Israel, and were especially vulnerable therefore to cultic dangers" (p. 5). That explanation is not at all clear and I do not find it in the substantial notes to the *New Jerusalem Bible* or the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* translations.

There is another, alternative, account of this event in 1 Chronicles. This one is more logically consistent: *Satan* inspires David to conduct the census; the general asks David why he "should involve Israel in guilt."⁴ This may allude to the expansion of state power (at God's expense) implied by a census; the very establishment of the kingdom under Saul was, according to 1 Samuel 8:7-8, viewed by God as a matter of "rejecting me and serving other gods." Quite possibly a census at some point was followed by a plague, and convinced that such events represent divine wrath, the religious authorities concluded that the one caused the other.

What's Avakian's take on these stories? First he emphasizes the illogic of the first account; God is not merely "cruel and monstrous" (p. 4) but wholly arbitrary in his infliction of cruelty. Then in discussing the sec-

3. 2 Samuel 24:1-24

4. 1 Chronicles 21:3

ond, he gives no thought to the possibility that a scribal error might have introduced the logical contradiction between the two accounts. Instead he assumes that the first was composed earlier than the second (although that is not clear) and that the depiction of God's irrational brutality in 2 Samuel was simply "too much for the author" of 1 Chronicles. It just made God look too cruel, so the chronicler rewrote the tale in order to depict God more favorably (p. 5).

This desire to depict the object of Jews' and Christians' reverence in the worst possible light pervades the book. Avakian focuses on the personality of the "lunatic, maniacal and murderous god of the Bible" while his followers respond, we're informed, with "[Laughter]" (p. 6). One wonders here, and will wonder repeatedly while reading this book in a country where about 78% of the population is Christian and about 1% religious Jews, *who this book is aimed at*, and who it's designed to move, provoke or offend.

Avakian suddenly shifts his attention to the believers in this deity: "...even many religious people who are generally progressive," he declares, as if to place all Bible believers on the defensive "...have the nerve to talk about the alleged horrors of communism" when their god has insisted on actions no communist leader has ever even advocated (p. 6). (Rephrased: what right does a progressive Methodist have to criticize collectivization in the USSR in the 1930s?)

Who, he asks, "*needs* such a god?" Avakian cites Psalm 137:8-9, in which the psalmist prays that the little babies of the Babylonians who had conquered his homeland get dashed against the rock. Fair enough; one *should* expose the fact the ancient Israelites who produced these texts were apparently comfortable with mass murder. It's fine too to note that the Book of Isaiah joyously predicts how the Israelites will exact revenge on Babylon by raping women and killing babies. It seems tendentious to add, however, that Isaiah was "one of Jesus's favorite parts of the Jewish scripture" (p. 13). Are we to assume Jesus (if he actually existed) *especially* got off on the descriptions of bloody revenge?

God, the Original Fascist

The God of the Bible, Avakian tells us, has been analyzed in the RCP newspaper, in "an important series of articles, 'God, the Original Fascist'" by one A. Brooks in 2005.⁵ (Reading them at the time, I thought that what was "important" in them was the apparent intent to totally alienate religious people.) Those articles castigated the God of the Old Testament (Yahweh) for his sending of plagues; for subjecting the Hebrews into slavery in Egypt; for commanding them to slaughter the inhabitants of Canaan, etc. But neither Brooks nor Avakian (assuming they are different people) have explained how the twentieth century phenomenon of fascism, carefully defined and discussed within the international communist movement from the 1920s, applies to the deity represented in the Bible. (Does that deity, for example, merge corporate and state power during a period of economic crisis, crush the left, promote a personality cult, encourage pseudo-scientific theories of racial superiority and militaristic values?) In this usage the term seems a mere epithet, synonymous with "evil."

If God's "fascist" character is merely asserted, never explained, so too the fascism of Christian fundamentalists is merely declared:

Now, right away, the question may arise: "Why do you call these right-wing Christian fundamentalists Christian Fascists?" Well, the simple and basic reason is that they *are* Christians, and that they *are* fascists. [Laughter] They are the present-day American version of the Nazis in Germany, headed by Hitler, in the period before and during World War 2. They want to impose a fascist *theocracy* on society.... (p. 16).

This introduction of the "Christian Fascism" theme, familiar to any reader of the RCP press for the last several years, explains the sudden fervor of Avakian's "Away With All Gods!" project. To fight the specter of fascism, you have to challenge the religion (with its "Original Fascist" God) that supposedly gives rise to it.

5. *Revolution*, issues 15-23 (Sept. 25-Nov. 20, 2005)

Avakian lumps together the “right-wing fundamentalists,” who are in fact divided into numerous movements and sects. (Avakian seems to think the “Hard Dominionists” mount more of a threat than they actually do.)⁶ One of the “striking” things about them, he declares, is their assertion that they uphold not the “old covenant” (the Laws of Moses in the Old Testament) but the new one, based on the teachings of Jesus. It is telling that Avakian finds this “striking,” since it’s really Christianity 101 material.

A Fundamental Ignorance of Christian Doctrine

This point, introduced in passing, is in fact *central* to the understanding of Christianity. But Avakian fails to grasp its meaning throughout his long sermon. St. Paul, whom Avakian proceeds to discuss next, was a Hellenized Greek-speaking Jew born in Tarsus (now part of Turkish Kurdistan) who took it upon himself to preach a version of Christianity to Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) in the eastern Mediterranean world. His theology, in a nutshell, is this: God selected the Jews as his “chosen people,” giving them a body of law governing their lives (dietary habits, sexual practices, customs pertaining to ritual purity, etc.) in detail during the time of Moses. God had judged them at any point of time by their faithfulness to these laws, punishing or rewarding them. This was the basic Judaism of his day. But by becoming incarnate in human form, in the person of Jesus Christ (over a thousand years after Moses), and undergoing the process of his ministry, crucifixion, death and resurrection, Jesus, in Paul’s view, initiated a new era (and new “covenant” with all humankind). Now believers in Jesus—not only Jews but anyone—could obtain salvation through faith alone.

6. The “Dominionists” are a loosely connected collection of Christian groups inspired by the mandate given by God in Genesis 1:28 for human beings to “subdue” and “have dominion” over the earth. Divided in the U.S. among the “Christian Reconstructionists” and advocates of “Kingdom Now theology” among others, they call for Christians to acquire political power to impose their interpretations of divine law on society. For one analysis, see Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons, *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000)

(Later Christianity was to downplay this doctrine and emphasize the believer’s need to perform penances, undertake fasts, contribute to the Church, and acquire merit by such acts as pilgrimages, all designed to strengthen Church authority. The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century revived emphasis on Paul’s doctrine of salvation by faith, rather than such “works.” As Karl Marx put it, Martin Luther “shattered faith in authority because he restored the authority of faith.”⁷ The Christian believer, equipped with the Bible translated into his/her own language, could interpret it personally and imagine him or her self relating directly to God, rather than having to accept the Church as intercessor. This had profound socio-economic repercussions, as Marx, Max Weber, R. H. Tawney and many others have pointed out.⁸ In breaking down the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and validating productive and profit-making life in this world, and in positing virtuous lives in trades and commerce—rather than in the Church—it had a lot to do with the transition from feudalism to capitalism.)

The doctrine of salvation by faith stated one could ultimately obtain eternal life in communion with God by sincerely accepting Jesus as one’s “savior.” (The specific timing of this ultimate salvation was a matter of controversy among early Christians; there was no consensus about Christians resurrecting in Heaven immediately after death.) Most Christians came to feel they were not bound by the centuries-old Mosaic laws, with their draconian punishments, and some very significant Christian sects (such as the Marcionites in the mid-second century, “heretical” followers of Paul) even came to reject the Old Testament and its god Yahweh in general.⁹ They imagined a much higher Father God

7. Marx notes this in his well known “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” of 1844, in which he observes that “religion is the opiate of the masses.” He while noting that the primary aspect of religion is false consciousness, he notes the historically positive role of the Protestant Reformation.

8. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (published in German, 1905; many English publications); R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York: New American Library, 1954)

9. See Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion, the Gospel of the Alien God* (originally published in German, 1921; Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth Press, 1990), for an introduction to the mul-

that didn't throw temper tantrums like Yahweh (the "Jehovah" of the King James Bible).

Paul's synthesis of Jewish monotheism with a Christ-centered message may strike us as illogical, even laughable. But we need to at least *understand* it if we're to mount a serious critique of Christianity or influence/dissuade serious Christians. Avakian doesn't get this far. His comments on Paul here (pp. 17-19) and later, are largely confined to the observation that Paul "upholds such things as slavery and the subjugation of women." This regrettably is the level of analysis found throughout this book the RCP insists the people "need."

Compare this with the discussion found in Alain Badiou's *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*.¹⁰ Badiou, an atheist philosopher sympathetic to Maoism, emphasizes Paul's break with Jewish exclusivism—his declarations that in Christ there is no Jew nor Greek, free nor slave, male nor female; and that God shows no partiality.¹¹ He emphasizes what Paul does *not* "uphold" in the Judaism of his time. His is a sophisticated, nuanced treatment of a central figure in world history, whose writings have moved billions, who deserves intelligent analysis. Avakian's discussion in contrast is superficial and arrogantly dismissive.

We Wouldn't Like Jesus If He Were Here Today

Next Avakian turns to the figure of Jesus, noting straight off that he, like Paul, "accepts slavery as a given" (p. 18). (He might here have included some specific discussion of Mosaic law pertaining to slavery, and how it differed with Roman law, notably in limiting service to six years with freedom obtained in the seventh.)¹² In the section ambitiously entitled "Seeing Jesus in a True Light" the author notes (a) Jesus was an exorcist who "(a)pparently...hadn't been paying attention to the field of medicine;" (b) upheld slavery as a given; (c) accepted male domination as a given; and (d) was wrong in his predictions about certain decisive events (p. 27).

tiplicity of Christian sects that eventually gave way to Roman Catholicism.

10. Stanford University Press, 2003

11. Badiou, p. 9, citing Galatians 3:28 and Romans 2:10

12. Exodus 21:1

Is Avakian really shining a "true light" on the subject matter here? I think of Mao's succinct dictum: "No investigation, no right to speak."¹³ Has he really done the necessary investigation about this topic, entitling him to preach as he does, as though he knows what he's talking about? He says nothing about the attacks by the Jesus of the gospels on the Pharisees and Sadducees, his critique of formal public worship and advocacy of a personal relationship with God (validating the individual of whatever status), or his concept of the "Kingdom of God" (or as sometimes translated, "God's imperial rule") as a challenge to the Roman Empire.¹⁴ Avakian does not even discuss the thorny question of Jesus' historicity. (There is a strong minority view within New Testament scholarship that the Jesus of the Gospels never existed.)¹⁵ Instead, he merely gives us a broadside against the Jesus depicted in Christian scripture. For example: why, asks Avakian, if Jesus *was* the son of God, didn't he "tell people the truth" about the nature of disease, rather than exploiting their belief in demonic possession (p. 24)?

One wonders again: who is the audience here? The person remaining in the religious mode, who believes that Jesus is/was divine, but doesn't believe in demonic possession? Does Avakian suppose that such a person might be persuaded to abandon his/her faith by meditating on the question, "Why didn't Jesus say, 'There are no demons. The sicknesses I heal have natural scientifically explainable causes'?" Isn't the believer more likely to suppose that Jesus did heal, and that the people of the time understood this as exorcism? This is not so much a question of Avakian's obvious lack of understanding of, or empathy with, believers' feelings and emotions: it's a question of the effectiveness of the propaganda.

Avakian suggests that both Paul and Jesus not only accepted slavery and gender inequality, but indeed, "propagated and fostered" them (p. 23). He makes this

13. "Preface and Postscript to Rural Surveys" (March and April 1941), *Selected Works*, Vol. III, p. 13

14. The Pharisees and Sadducees were the dominant political and religious factions in Roman Judea in the first century CE.

15. For examples of scholars denying Jesus' historicity, see Robert M. Price, *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2003) and G. A. Wells, *The Jesus Myth* (Chicago: Open Court, 1998)

the *principle aspect* of these men's careers. But could he not make the very same case for practically *every* scientific and philosophical mind of note in the Roman Empire in the first century CE? By ignoring or dismissing the *new* content of their teachings, which had enormous historical repercussions (some of them positive), Avakian displays a remarkable lack of intellectual curiosity and willingness to "engage" the beliefs of past class societies on their own terms. He might as well berate slave-owning antiquity for being what it was and leave it at that. Why even bother looking at the details of religious evolution within those societies over time, since they were all slavery-based and patriarchal?

Paul did not, it's true, agitate against the slave system; indeed, he may have urged slaves to obey their masters (1 Timothy 6:1 and Titus 2:9-10, although authorship of these letters is disputed). But he clearly won over many slaves—almost all the people he salutes by name in the Epistle to the Romans (16:6-15) have slave names—and considered them equals in the organization that he was building. His, and other Christians' attitudes towards slavery, while by no means revolutionary, had important ramifications. While the Roman ruling class disparaged physical labor, Jesus was known to have been a carpenter and Paul a tent-maker; early Christianity dignified manual work largely performed by slaves. From the fourth century the Christianized Empire gave slaves, who had never been able to marry and whose unions could be broken up at any time due to sale, the same institution of marriage applied to other social classes. The "mainstream" Christian movement never led a revolution against slavery, but figures such as St. Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century condemned it passionately and it became rare in the European Middle Ages.

Thus Avakian's characterization of the relationship between early Christianity and slavery is to say the least undialectical. His main point, apparently, is that biblical Christian figures ought not be *revered* because they did not in their own time speak on behalf of principles that most people today (or at least those whom Avakian wants to reach) take for granted. He makes the point provocatively:

...if, somehow, Jesus were transported from his time to ours and we were to encounter him, the fact is that we would not, and we *should not*, like this Jesus very much (p. 83, Avakian's emphasis).

Confusing the Old and New Testaments

Avakian takes on the Ten Commandments (pp. 25-30), making some wholly valid points: they *do* recognize slavery and institutionalize patriarchy, and are part of a broader package of Mosaic Law that (like *all* law codes of antiquity) strike us today as irrational and draconian. Present-day calls for them to be publicly posted and specifically honored (above, say, the Code of Hammurabi of ancient Babylonia or the Laws of Manu composed in ancient India) are totally reactionary and should be opposed. But then Avakian segues into a section on how Christianity is "totally rooted in the Old Testament" (p. 31), again downplaying the Pauline "new covenant" concept to say nothing of the Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Persian influences on the fundamental doctrine of Christianity: the god who dies, descends into the netherworld, and is resurrected! (There is nothing in the Old Testament to justify that narrative, although there are parallel myths in the cults of Osiris and Isis, Tammuz and Ishtar, Mithras—all much older than Christianity.)¹⁶

Avakian is so bent upon Old Testament-New Testament consistency that he states "even most [Christian] fundamentalists (at least in the U.S.) don't...so far as I know" "sacrifice animals," as required by the Laws of Moses (p. 34)! This observation occurs within a section on "Fundamentalist and 'Salad Bar' Christianity." Here the author divides Christians into two types: those who believe scripture literally and those who choose which parts they wish to accept or reject. He notes that the former chastise the latter as "salad

16. The understanding that the Christian death and resurrection myth borrows from pagan mythology has been the subject of scholarly study from at least the time that Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* was published in 1890. It is amazing that something so obvious, and so crucial in the construction of a rational critique of Christian belief, would so escape Avakian's attention as he instead insists on treating the Bible—a disparate collection of texts produced, edited and re-edited over a thousand years—as a seamless whole.

bar Christians” for “passing over or putting aside that which makes them uncomfortable or strikes them as wrong,” and declares that there is truth in this claim. But he adds that not only liberal Christians but the fundamentalists “pick and choose,” giving the example cited above: they don’t practice animal sacrifice.

The implication is that this is a departure from Biblical teaching. But the fact is, the New Testament makes clear that followers of Jesus are free of the ritual obligations of Jewish law, including the requirement of offering sacrifice (prescribed in the Book of Leviticus). There is only one reference in the New Testament to Christians performing animal sacrifice. This occurs in the Book of Acts (21:18-29): Paul and four others visit the Temple in Jerusalem, on the advice of Jesus’s brother James, and have sacrifices made for them by the priests. They do this to quiet suspicions about Paul among the Jewish Christians (who continued to believe that the Laws of Moses should govern their lives). In participating in this ritual, Paul shows “he knows how to be ‘a Jew among Jews’” (Badiou, p. 29). But when Paul writes to the Christian communities he has founded, he forbids participation in *pagan* animal sacrifice (1 Corinthians 10:18) while making no comment about *Jewish* traditional sacrifice and instead emphasizing that the crucified *Jesus* is the sacrifice making such rituals irrelevant.

In other words, the fact that even the most fundamentalist Christians in the U.S. do not perform animal sacrifice is *not* a question of selectively accepting and rejecting Bible teaching. The suggestion that it is again reflects Avakian’s *fundamental misunderstanding* of the relationship between Christianity and the Old Testament—his lack of attention to the details of the subject matter about which he’s chosen to sermonize before his appreciative congregation.

“Salad Bar Christians:” Damned If They Don’t, Damned If They Do, Pick and Choose

Speaking to both liberal and fundamentalist Christians, Avakian states: “But then the very basic question arises: Once you have in effect denied that the Bible and Christian religious tradition is true and valid for all times and in all circumstances...then where is the

‘divine authority’ for any of this...?” (p. 33). Having stated that “most Christian fundamentalists” would “to be consistent” have to approve of beating children, putting homosexuals to death, shunning women during their menstrual periods, killing witches, raping women and carrying them off as “prizes of war,” and slaughtering non-Christians, he continues:

It is a legitimate and very important question, which must be put to these Christian Fascist fundamentalists. Which is it? One way or the other—either you believe that the Bible, all of it, is the “inerrant word of god,” and every word of it is absolutely true and must be believed in, or you don’t.

Note the abrupt switch from fundamentalists in general to “these Christian Fascist Fundamentalists.” “These people,” thunders Avakian, “must not be allowed to waffle and sidestep what, in the Bible and Christian religious tradition, is inconvenient for them at the time. (p. 34)”

Avakian here levels the “salad bar” charge at the fundamentalists more than the liberals, intending to force them to “admit that [if they] don’t believe in every word and every part of it...this cannot be the absolute word of God (p. 34).” You might suppose he would direct his remarks more at liberal Christians, who’d be more likely to give him the time of day and out of curiosity read his book. But they could respond that there is a long tradition in Christianity, dating at least to Origen of Alexandria (who flourished around 200) of interpreting the Old Testament myths *symbolically*. They might inform Avakian that Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), one of the most influential Christian theologians of the twentieth century, led a movement towards “demythologizing” the New Testament and that non-literal interpretations of the Bible are very standard in many Protestant seminaries.¹⁷ They might simply tell him that many self-identifying Christians *don’t* see the Bible as the “absolute” word of God, but believe it generally “inspired” by God, or have specific

17. See for example, Rudolf Karl Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner, 1958) and Karl Jaspers and Rudolf Karl Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity: An Inquiry into the Possibility of Religion without Myth* (New York: Noonday Press, 1958)

ideas about how to interpret it that are more sophisticated than the “salad bar” metaphor suggests.

A Scary Assessment of Religion vs. Science

Avakian then warns: “It is very important to understand that all this is deadly serious” (p. 35). It’s not entirely clear to the reader what “all this” is. The very existence of religion? The “monstrous” personalities of God, Jesus and Paul? The Ten Commandments? The salad bar? But Avakian shifts his discussion back to the “Christian Fascists”: “These people—not just the obvious lunatics out in the streets...but also the more ‘respectable types’” including the Family values Coalition and George W. Bush, not only “believe...they have a personal relationship with god, but that they are being given a mandate” including the invasion of Iraq. He cites “chilling and sobering” statements by Pat Robertson (in 1991) about the religious right’s “spiritual battle” against “Satanic forces” including atheists, communists and homosexuals and states that religious “lunatics” are currently in power (p. 37).

He moves on to a discussion of how rulers (like Napoleon) can be individually indifferent to religion but *use* it towards reactionary ends. He suggests that Ronald Reagan may have been personally agnostic but “as President, [he] actively promoted religion and fundamentalist Christian morality” (p. 41). Evidence for this includes U.S. support for Guatemalan president Rios-Montt, a born-again Christian, against leftist guerrillas in Guatemala; Reagan’s famous “joke” about bombing the USSR; and Reagan’s comment (as governor of California) that he hoped the distribution of food to the poor demanded by the Symbionese Liberation Army result in an outbreak of botulism (pp. 38-42). How all this connects to religious fundamentalism is in fact unclear; Reagan foreign policy in any case was more influenced by secular neoconservatives than Christian fundamentalist organizations which devoted their attention to reactionary “family values” issues.

Avakian’s next topics: the fundamentalist attack on evolution, promotion of “intelligent design,” the spread of “specifically Christian Fascist fundamentalism” within the military, the threat of a new Dark Ages (pp. 43-45). Following this structureless section, Ava-

kian poses the question: “If Gods Do Not Exist, Why Do People Believe In Them?” “Let’s step back and get a broader picture from history,” he suggests (p. 46). But rather than drawing upon the rich literature available on this topic, from Ludwig Feuerbach and other theorists who influenced Marx and Engels through William James, Max Müller, Max Weber, Mircea Eliade, James Campbell, James George Frazer, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Victor Turner, etc., Avakian presents a remarkably pedestrian answer to the question he poses.

He informs us that the Genesis creation story “doesn’t correspond to reality, it is not borne out by what science has taught us...” (p. 46) and that people everywhere have invented myths “to explain things like where they came from...” (p. 47). Myths, he assures us, “are not a true description of nature,” but religious “stories and scriptures are precisely rooted in myths...” (pp. 47-8). There is no evidence for the Noah’s Ark story, he announces. (As though anybody who has followed him this far is likely to think, “Well maybe *that* one was true.” Is this sort of primitive discussion really necessary?)

Stories like this are “not harmless,” Avakian continues, because they keep “people mentally enslaved” (p. 51). From the dawn of class society, they have been used by ruling classes to exploit and oppress. That, apparently, to the author’s satisfaction, answers the question he’s posed: “Why do people believe in gods?”

The question and answer session continues with “Why Do People Believe in *Different* Gods?” Because of conquest (Mexicans would still believe in the Aztec gods had not the conquistadores introduced Christianity, pp. 52-3); arbitrary events that generate a new cult here or there; and the fact that “powerful institutions in society” embrace different gods and indoctrinate people to worship them (p. 57). In bold print Part One concludes, “as a kind of summation:”

The notion of a god, or gods, was created by humanity, in its infancy, out of ignorance. This has been perpetuated by ruling classes... Bringing about a new, and far better, world and future for humanity means overthrowing such classes...

Some readers familiar with the history of Marxist literature might note that this case has been made many times before in the last 160 years or so, and wonder how Avakian's preaching deepens the case.

A Suggested Alternative Approach

They might wonder why—respecting the intelligence of his readership—he doesn't say something like the following:

As Friedrich Engels once said, "It's impossible to separate thought from matter that thinks."

Anybody imagining God thinks of God as having a mind, emotions, will, creativity. We humans have those things. But how long have they been around? Thought emanates from brains attached to nervous systems. Brains have been around for about 450 million years on this planet (beginning with fish brains). Mammal brains have been here for about 200 million years. *Homo sapiens* have been around maybe 250,000 years.

We distinguish ourselves from other animals, as Marx and Engels pointed out, by engaging in production and progressively changing the world around us. At some point, after we started to use language (some scholars place this at about 50,000 years ago) in order to explain natural phenomena, we invented gods. We comforted our children by telling them that thunder was caused by the thunder-god, who would finish his outburst soon; we explained the changing of the seasons by stories of gods' deaths and rebirths. The Bible story about God creating Man in his own image really has it backwards: humans created gods, giving them human characteristics. They *created*, like we do; they loved, they got angry. They demanded to be fed. They conferred rewards on those that please them, and punished those that didn't.

About 3000 years ago some societies produced the idea that there was only *one* god, or one Creator-God assisted by minor deities. Zoroastrianism in Central Asia and Persia, and some schools in ancient Indian thought, conceived of the One God before the Hebrews, who in fact during the Babylonian Captivity of the sixth century BCE were significantly influenced by Zoroastrianism. Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, was originally the

tribal god of the Hebrews. But since those in exile believed that he accompanied them to Babylon, he became larger: the lord of the whole cosmos.

Jewish monotheism was influenced by Greek thought when Alexander the Great conquered the Middle East. Judea was at the center of trade routes and during the Roman period came to have a highly mixed population. Lots of new trends, influenced by other religions, emerged in Judaism. Christianity was one of these. It borrows the very un-Jewish notion of God taking human form, dying a horrible death, then rising from the dead and saving souls. The unique thing about it is that it makes God very *human*. Jesus is the ideal man, loving, kind, forgiving, just. In worshipping this deity, humans departed from the earlier practices of worshipping fantastic or monstrous figures, or a distant Father God, and came to worship an idealized version of themselves. (This is what Feuerbach calls the "essence" of Christianity.) But once we—including those of us who have been Christians, or attracted to Christianity—rationally *understand* this history, we can break with it, or with other religious thinking. It is a product of the human mind. There is beauty and comfort in it; as Marx put it: it is an expression of suffering, and a protest against suffering. But again: it is impossible to separate thought from matter that thinks—impossible to separate God from the thinking *homo sapiens* who created religion.

According to current scientific thinking, the expanding cosmos we live in was "created" about 14 billion years ago in a "big bang." Who knows what happened before that? Maybe there have *always* been big bangs followed by big collapses. Maybe, even, consciousness *did* precede the (most recent) big bang. The relationship between space and time is a fascinating one, and to study it or even think about it without dogma and easy mythological explanations is at least as "spiritually" rewarding as clinging to religious belief.

Maybe the religious believer hearing that sort of thing will remain unmoved and resist the message. But maybe it will stick in his/her head and produce some change in thinking over time. I think it a better approach than Avakian takes here, which relies on primitive analysis and crude ridicule.

A Foray Into New Testament Commentary

In Part Two of *Away With All Gods!* Avakian attempts an historical overview of the emergence of Christianity and Islam and asks why fundamentalism is growing in the contemporary world. His discussion of the first relies heavily on works by two scholars of early Christianity, Bart D. Ehrman and James D. Tabor. Ehrman's fine book *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (2005) explains how the Bible contains interpolated material and passages inserted by scribes.¹⁸ Avakian uses it to drive home the point that the Bible is a set of human documents. Tabor's book *The Jesus Dynasty: the Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity* (2006) is as Avakian observes more controversial.¹⁹

Tabor argues that Jesus's half-brother (?) James, rather than Peter, succeeded him as head of his movement but that Peter was later recognized as leader while Paul promoted a new version of Christianity among the Gentiles. Had James's "line" won out, Christianity would have developed as a Jewish sect rather than the world religion it became.²⁰ Avakian uses this work to argue that the emergence of Christianity in the latter form was not inevitable but a matter of contingency; had Paul died earlier than he did, things might have turned out differently (p. 79).

Avakian's main points are uncontroversial and widely accepted in secular and liberal religious scholarship on Christian history. But he gets some of the details wrong. He suggests that "the early Christians were having a lot of difficulty getting people to join their movement" because of Jewish dietary restrictions and the practice of circumcision. This assumes that "the early Christians" were seeking non-Jewish members in what was still a Jewish sect, and frustrated at their low recruitment efforts. In fact it was Paul who brought the movement to Gentiles, rejecting the requirements of circumcision and adherence to Mosaic Law for them—

not because he had had "a lot of difficulty" imposing such requirements but because his "new covenant theology" obviated the old law. As the Epistle to the Galatians (chapters 1-2) makes clear, he faced significant opposition from James, Peter and John.

Some Confusion about Early Christian History

While lecturing on the "Pivotal Role and Influence of Paul" (p. 72f) Avakian continues to demonstrate his fundamental misunderstanding of something Badiou grasps very well: for Paul "...the Law, in its previous imperative, is not, is no longer, tenable, even for those who claim to follow it... [it is] a principle of death for the suddenly ascendant truth..."²¹ Christians are free from the Old Testament law. That is what the Pauline "justification by faith" doctrine is all about. Avakian mentions in passing that Paul shifted "toward an essentially exclusive emphasis on faith" but associates this with "a shift from concern with *this* world toward preoccupation with the supposed next world...(p. 81)," missing the point entirely. The emphasis on faith was a shift from Jewish exclusivism to universalism—with *extraordinary implications* for "this world."

The issue of the responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus has always been controversial. Avakian does not really address this question, but simply notes that "this whole story of how the Jews were the ones responsible for Jesus being crucified is very improbable" and points out (validly) that the gospel accounts have always been used to promote anti-Semitism (pp. 76-7). He states incorrectly that "scholarship has shown" that the gospel narrative about Jewish responsibility for the crucifixion "was worked into the Christian tradition about a century after the death of Jesus" (p. 77). That would mean that circa 130 CE all four gospels (probably authored between 70 and 100) were altered to assert this responsibility. Avakian does not cite any scholarship on the point.

The gospels all indicate that the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate actually ordered the execution; he had the authority to do so. They also indicate Pilate did not initiate the trial and execution (the arrest was

18. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005

19. Indeed, the whole career of Tabor, who has vouched for the authenticity of a version of the Ten Commandments carved in Hebrew letters on a boulder found in New Mexico, supposedly dating back over 500 years but thought by most archaeologists to be fake, is controversial.

20. Tabor, pp. 75, 80

21. Badiou, p. 27

conducted by Sanhedrin authorities, although in the Gospel of John a Roman cohort accompanies their agents). Of course imputing responsibility to “the Jews” in general for the death of Jesus is illogical and worse. (The gospels sometimes do impute this; see for example Matthew 27:25, which has been exploited by Christian anti-Semites for centuries with murderous effect.) But the gospel scenario is not at all implausible: the Sanhedrin (Jewish authorities), hostile to Jesus for his harsh criticism and militant display in the Temple overturning the tables of the money-changers (Mark 11:15, Matthew 21:12-16, Luke 19:45-46), arrested Jesus for blasphemy and then asked Pilate to execute him for sedition against Rome. The Roman Jewish historian Josephus indeed wrote, in his *Jewish Antiquities* (ca. 90 CE) that “...Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing among us, had condemned him to be crucified...” (emph. added).²²

In any case, one has to problematize this issue of “responsibility.” To recognize the likelihood that Jewish authorities initiated the events leading to Jesus’s death is not to attribute responsibility to Jews of the time collectively. There were obviously Christians among the Jewish population of Roman Judea and beyond, and we can’t of course in any case blame whole peoples for decisions made by their leaders. But even the sweeping imputation of blame of “the Jews” we find in the gospels (especially John) has to be understood in the theological context: Christians (in a movement with increasing non-Jewish composition) understood the Jews to have rejected their own Messiah. The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE during the First Roman-Jewish War was viewed as God’s punishment of the Judeans collectively for that rejection.²³

In the long footnote accompanying Avakian’s statement that “scholarship has shown” that the “Jewish responsibility” story was “worked into” the Bible a century after Jesus’ death, there isn’t the citation for that assertion one might expect. Rather, there’s a long comment about how the anti-Semitism of “Protestant Christian fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson”

ostensibly manifested in their support for Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* film jibes with their support for the state of Israel (pp. 77-8). (The choice of words is interesting; why avoid “*Christian Fascists* like Falwell and Robertson”? Why leave it at “*fundamentalists*”? Avakian’s use of these terms is inconsistent.) The gist is: “the imperialist rulers of the U.S.” need to support Israel “as a military outpost and instrument of U.S. imperialism in the world.” Therefore—even while guided by Christian Fascists (if we follow Avakian’s earlier discussion), who embrace the anti-Semitism the RCP finds in the gospels themselves, they have to reconcile that support and Christian fundamentalism (“a rather acute contradiction”) through the Second Coming doctrine. This doctrine, rooted in the Book of Revelation, maintains that Jesus will return at the time of the Rapture following a bloody war centering in Jerusalem.²⁴ Fundamentalist Christians in the U.S. are some of the most ardent supporters of the State of Israel, even though they tend to believe that when Jesus returns non-Christians will be punished for their unbelief in the Final Judgment.

There is a certain amount of truth in this assessment, and the question of Israel is sufficiently central to Avakian’s topic that one wonders why it is consigned to a footnote occupying nearly two pages. The question of why the U.S. imperialists support Israel, to a degree that many (mainstream bourgeois) analysts actually find inimical to broader U.S. imperialist interests, can’t be boiled down to the fact that it’s “a military outpost.” There are no U.S. bases there, while there are U.S. military outposts all over the world including nations surrounding Israel in the Middle East. Maybe in order to explain U.S. support for Israel we need to emphasize the vast resources of the Israel Lobby, a complicated web of organizations spanning secular Jewish Zionists and fervent Christian evangelicals who exercise enormous clout as voters and political donors. This may be an instance in which policy doesn’t stem from imperialist “necessity” but from well-organized religious (and secular nationalist/Zionist) forces.

22. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.63-64

23. Judith Lieu, John A. North and Tessa Rajak, eds., *The Jews Among Pagans and Christians: In the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 83

24. See Revelation 16:16f, where the Battle of Armageddon is described.

Avakian notes the pivotal role of Emperor Constantine in the history of Christianity (pp. 63-4). He refers in passing to the fact that monotheism might have been advantageous to Roman unification "...[a]s new territory would be conquered" (p. 79). Actually, Rome was at its height; it did not after Constantine conquer and hold new territory.²⁵ But it would be worth examining the value of Christianity to the process of unifying the highly diverse empire that already existed. Unfortunately Avakian, who is not inclined to find positives in the history of Christianity, does not pursue this thought.

Avakian might have added that in the course of the fourth century Christianity was legalized, standardized (at the contentious Council of Nicea, 325), and imposed on all Roman citizens (380). The state-backed orthodoxy that emerged, and the specific package of texts accepted as the New Testament, were decided politically while heterodox texts were torched and "heretical" schools crushed. Thus the Christianity that Avakian critiques is simply the triumphant version among many that had competed with one another earlier.

The Roman Empire had been tolerant of religious diversity, while the Church Triumphant viciously persecuted opposition. Avakian notes the irony of fundamentalist Christians in the U.S. complaining of their own imagined persecution (p. 69). But he surely overstates the case in asserting that from Constantine's time to our own "in the 'Christian world,' life has been hell to all those who have refused to practice Christianity..." (p. 72). Here as elsewhere his measurement of what he sees as the enemy lacks perspective.

"Why," Avakian asks pompously, "have I gone into this to such an extent (p. 81)?" His rambling answer to his own question includes (a) Christianity has exerted widespread influence on world history; (b) it was taken up as the state religion by many ruling classes; (c) it is the "favored religion" in the U.S., and there is a move by powerful forces to make it "the *official state religion* of America;" and so (d) it is important to understand it. It is based on *earthly* factors. We need to *demystify* Christianity, and realizing that (as quoted above) "we

should not like this Jesus very much" (p. 83). "This," he declares, "all belongs to the past (p. 84)."

A Superficial Glance at Islam

The title of the next section, "Islam Is No Better (and No Worse) Than Christianity," is self-explanatory. Apparently based on the competent scholarship of Maxime Rodinson (not cited, but included in the bibliography) it is one of the least problematic sections of the book, an effort at historical materialist explanation for the rise of Islam in the early seventh century.²⁶ Avakian draws attention to the obvious: that the Qur'an justifies slavery and patriarchy just like the Bible does. The section concludes with the question: "Is the Allah of Islam any different, in any meaningful way, from "God the Original Fascist" of the "Judeo-Christian" religious tradition?" (p. 95).

I'd note that "Allah" is simply Arabic for "God" (closely related to *Elohim* in Hebrew) but that this deity as described in the Qur'an *may*, actually, be somewhat different from the Yahweh of the Old Testament, or the God the Father of the Christian Trinity. According to the Qur'an, Allah explicitly insures that the righteous Jew, Christian or Sabian, as well as the Muslim, will enter Paradise (Qur'an surah 2:62). These are "People of the Book." (Christian scriptures in contrast, if interpreted literally, seem to consign non-Christians to hell-fire.)²⁷ He commands that there be no conversion by compulsion (2:191 and 2:226). Even if this principle was not always observed, the general history of Islam is one of far greater tolerance than one finds in Christian societies into the modern period. In the caliphates and in Muslim Spain and the Balkans people were encouraged to convert to Islam because by the positive expedient of *tax exemptions*, but Jews and Christians could go about their business and even attain high posts.

These things need to be mentioned, particularly in the context of the vicious anti-Muslim campaign that has been waged recently by those promoting the supposed threat of "Islamofascism." The RCP has appropriately opposed that campaign. But curiously, as

25. The Empire actually reached its maximum extent during the time of Trajan (d. 117).

26. Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammed, Prophet of Islam* (New York: Pantheon, 1980)

27. For example, John 3:18, Acts 4:12

a proponent of the “Christian Fascist” threat, Avakian does not deal with the Islamofascism topic. Perhaps a comparison of the two concepts, Islamofascism and Christian Fascism, would weaken his case about the threat the latter supposedly poses.

Avakian now turns to the “War on Terror” and the argument some of its advocates have made that Islamic fundamentalism is somehow more evil and dangerous than other forms of religious fundamentalism. He addresses the charge that there has not been separation of church (mosque) and state in Islam (p. 97). But rather than taking this on concretely—noting that there are and have been Muslim-majority states with secularist regimes, and that some of these (Mossadegh’s Iran, Saddam’s Iraq, Baathist Syria), have been specifically targeted by U.S. imperialism while it embraces the most repressive Islamic state in the world (Saudi Arabia)—Avakian argues that the separation between church and state in the U.S. is incomplete and threatened. (He does subsequently describe U.S. efforts to undermine secular regimes in the Muslim world, p. 106f, but his point there is to emphasize how fundamentalist Islam emerges in reaction to U.S. aggression.) He appropriately labels the “War on Terror” an imperialist war, and quotes his own 1997 talk contending that the “two reactionary poles” of Jihad and McWorld/McCrusade (violent anti-western Islamism and U.S. imperialism) “reinforce each other, even while opposing each other” (p. 100).

An Explanation for the Growth of Religious Fundamentalism

In his next section (“Why Is Religious Fundamentalism Growing in Today’s World?”) Avakian seeks an economic explanation for the question posed. He links it to the rise of the “informal economy” of the cities of the Third World, to the “very insecure and unstable existence” of the masses, causing people to look to religious fundamentalism as an “anchor” (p. 102). (In a footnote he addresses the rise of Christian fundamentalism in the U.S., among a very different stratum, the middle class [p. 104]). He observes that many who have turned to Islamism might a generation ago have been Maoists, but the communist movement in Indo-

nesia and other Muslim countries was destroyed by U.S. imperialism (pp. 110-2). Meanwhile the U.S. actively supported *jihadis* against the Soviets in Afghanistan (p. 107).

Suddenly the author shifts gears and without naming any names lambastes those taking “a smugly arrogant attitude towards religious fundamentalism and religion in general...” By this time, surely, some readers will want to accuse Avakian of precisely that. But he assures us, “It is a deep form of contempt for the masses to fail to take seriously the deep belief that many of them have in religion...” and it is necessary, “in the fight against injustice and oppression, to unite as broadly as possible with people who continue to hold religious beliefs” (p. 114).

Avakian proceeds to link the fundamental contradiction of capitalism, as expressed in Marxist political economy—that between socialized production and private appropriation—with the contradiction between the highly developed technology and science alongside the growth of “organized ignorance” (p. 115). The development of the forces of production does not necessarily produce more “enlightenment,” and ignorance rooted in religion can “reinforce the system of capitalist accumulation” (p. 117). These interesting, if undeveloped, points conclude Part Two.

Laughing at Basic Christian Doctrines

In Part Three, the shortest and least substantial of the four, Avakian begins to develop his thesis about “Christian Fascism” which has hovered in the background so far. First he illustrates how Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all patriarchal belief systems; he has already done so but he adds further examples, beginning with the depiction of Jesus as God’s “son” and citing John 3:16: “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.”

“Let’s dig more deeply into this,” he suggests, “—what it is actually putting forward and what it is actually promoting. (p. 122).” He repeats the Genesis Creation myth, about the Fall, noting the obvious: “underlying this very verse...is the notion that humanity is

all screwed up... That's the first point to keep in mind here."

The second point: "Why a *son*? And anyway, the idea is absurd. [Laughter] If you believe in God, God could have as many sons as he wanted. [Laughter]" (p. 122). But Avakian explains that daughters meant little in a male-dominated society. "To bring out the point more sharply"—as though he has made the point sharply already—"try thinking of the Bible saying: 'For God so loved the world, that he gave up his only begotten daughter.' It just doesn't ring true, does it? [Laughter]" (p. 123). The dismissive tone (and response of the congregation) recalls his earlier references to the Trinity.

"...Jesus," he declares on page 27, "was not a supernatural being, part of the same substance of God, the Father, and at the same time the son of God." A footnote on the same page states: "Here I won't attempt to further explore the arcane Christian doctrine of the Trinity..." As though he had ever really broached the matter! Later he writes that "Nobody understands" the doctrine. "And then there's this whole matter of the holy spirit. Holy shit, nobody knows what that means!" [Laughter] (p. 64).

Actually, we know quite a lot about what the Trinity means, and has meant, to its advocates. Not only have Christian writers explicated it from the time of Tertullian (the first to use the term, around 216), but intellectual historians have studied its relationship to Neoplatonism and Indian thought. It may all be mystical nonsense to Avakian, worthy of ridicule and an easy laugh from his flock, but it produced, in the minds of some first-class thinkers from Augustine to Feuerbach (who devotes a chapter to interesting psychological analysis of the Trinity in his *Essence of Christianity* of 1841, famously admired by Marx), some very creative thinking.²⁸

Here I find myself wondering again about the question of audience. Who is Avakian trying to reach? I'd suppose he would like to influence such Christian religious minds as Cornel West, Rev. George W. Web-

28. Ludwig Feuerbach, "Chapter VII: The Mystery of the Trinity," in *The Essence of Christianity*, ed. and abridged by E. Graham Waring and F. W. Srothmann (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1973), pp. 31-3

ber, and Fr. Daniel Berrigan, all of whom have spoken up for him in the past. I imagine he's not simply or even primarily addressing atheists and agnostics. There are certainly people who define themselves as Christian who are open to questioning the existence of God, but who have worked out sophisticated interpretations of Christian doctrine in their own minds.

For example, someone raised in a Christian tradition might explain the Trinity as follows: A Supreme Mind created and in some sense oversees the cosmos. That's God the "Father." This being is not even necessarily male, but is beyond human understanding; nevertheless, human beings have minds that derive from that Mind. This interconnection is the Holy Spirit, a dynamic ongoing interaction between the cosmic mind and humanity. Jesus, the Son, links God the Father and humanity as a divine presence on earth in human form during a brief period of human history. He was equally divine and human, and left a legacy of model behavior and ethical teaching.

Someone who thinks that way about the Trinity, encountering Avakian's comments on the doctrine, would likely respond with the thought, "How trite" or even "How insulting." He/she might even think he's showing contempt for the masses, who are, I repeat, overwhelmingly Christians—people Avakian says it's necessary to "unite [with] as broadly as possible." How do you unite with people as you insult them?

Meandering Thoughts on Religion and Patriarchy

Avakian links the Trinity to patriarchal values. It's actually more complicated than that. There were sects in the early Christian movement that conceived of God as a Trinity of Father, Mother and Son. Or Father, Sophia (Wisdom, conceived of as female), and Son. Of course he is interested in critiquing the Christianity that won out, and one would not expect him to examine defeated Gnostic Christianities. But his whole discussion of gender in early Christianity is simplistic.

Earlier, while asserting that Jesus had accepted and promoted patriarchy (p. 20), Avakian had linked the cult surrounding his mother (the "Virgin Mary") with the control of women and their sexuality as male

property. Here (pp. 124-5) he returns to that theme. He notes quite properly (if flippantly, accompanied by [Laughter]) that there is an incongruity in asserting that Jesus was born of a virgin and yet tracing his lineage (as Matthew 1:16 does) through “Joseph the husband of Mary.” (Luke 3:23 states “it was thought” he was son of Joseph.) Avakian notes that her genealogy does not count. “Why? Because she’s a woman” (p. 124).

None of this is wrong, and it actually echoes some feminist scholarship on the Virgin Mary cult, but it is entirely one-sided. Avakian notes that Mary’s “role is to be the loving, long-suffering mother of Jesus,” which is to say, a model of oppressed womanhood. He adds she serves as “a kind of ‘intercessor’ for people in their supplications to God” (pp. 124-5). But he does not pause to consider the possible implications of the fact that Christianity wound up positing Mary as an object (maybe *the* most popular object) of veneration for believers, who have for centuries publicly and privately worshipped her as the “Mother of God” and the “Queen of Heaven.” Her cult may have drawn upon and absorbed pre-Christian “earth mother goddess” cults; its relationship to patriarchy in what was in any case a highly patriarchal society by the time Christianity emerged is a question worth studying.

It is significant that Paul wrote that in Christ there are “no more distinctions...between male and female” (Galatians 3:28); that he sends his letter to the Romans via a female deacon (Romans 16:1); that early Christians produced the *Acts of Paul* celebrating the works of Thecla, a female associate of Paul who preaches and baptizes. It is not enough to simply recount the Eve story, or cite 1 Timothy 2:11 (Pauline authorship contested) on how women should be silent in church (p. 123). The whole issue of how women were impacted by Christianity (as opposed to pre-Christian forms of patriarchal religion, or patriarchal traditions surrounding the Christian world during the last two millennia during which patriarchy has prevailed throughout class society, everywhere!) is a complex one deserving mature analysis.

Again switching gears, Avakian discusses how (male) Muslim immigrants to France from patriarchal

societies in North Africa, encountering what from their “traditional framework” seems an “excess of freedom” for women, may be drawn to deeper religiosity, and how globally conditions of uncertainty cause people “to gravitate to a powerful father figure...” But since “a powerful father figure in a *human* form is not enough for many people,” “there is an assertion” (by someone) of “the image of an all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful God—for whom, lo, the powerful head of state is a representative...” (p. 128).

That sort of situation in the U.S., Avakian notes, has produced the acute controversy about gay marriage, not that such marriages would “undermine and destroy patriarchy” since patriarchy “is already the case in many gay relationships” (p. 129). But the Christian Fascists’ objective in opposing gay marriage is to “enforce ‘traditional morality’” (p. 131). Avakian devotes several pages to this question, without considering the fact that many Christians without specifically fascist inclinations but inclined towards biblical literalism believe with Paul (Romans 1:26-7) that homosexual acts are “unnatural” and opposed by God and so oppose gay marriage on such grounds. It is quite remarkable that the chair of a party that up to 2000 contained language in its program about “eliminating” homosexuality under socialism can conflate this or that degree of religiously-based homophobia (or at least, opposition to gay marriage) with “fascism” at this point.

Patriarchal, Christian Fascist forces in the U.S. promote corporal punishment. But, Avakian ringingly pontificates: “Let us be clear: female children, and children in general, should not be seen and treated as the property of their parents, and their father in particular. This is not the world we are aiming for...” (p. 133). There follow several pages on comments about proper child-rearing and the debate about “permissiveness,” culminating in the bold-print conclusion “**we need revolution**” (p. 135).

Avakian next addresses the question of why the Bible Belt of the U.S. has also been the “Lynching Belt,” and how fundamentalist religion has historically justified and abetted slavery, then the Jim Crow laws, while Black preachers in the South (Martin Luther King included) have been unable to break with the system and

“cannot lead the struggle” (pp. 136-49). A brief note on “Christian Fascism and Genocide” reminds us that the Bible says homosexuals should be put to death, and that Avakian in 1998 had called Pat Robertson’s comments on crime and punishment “an unmistakable suggestion of a ‘final solution’ against the masses of people in the inner cities...” (p. 150). Ten years later, following major setbacks to the religious right, and their diminished influence in national politics as shown in the current presidential campaign, this sort of talk seems overdramatic. And Avakian has still not provided a persuasive analysis or even *operational definition* of “Christian Fascism.”

Part Three concludes with assertion that belief in sin and in religion in general constitutes a “slave mentality.” Interestingly enough Avakian paraphrases Malcolm X (a profoundly religious man): “I didn’t come here to tell you what you want to hear” (p. 153). What Avakian’s come to say is:

“Oppressed people who are unable or unwilling to confront reality as it actually is, are condemned to remain enslaved and oppressed.”

A Long Critique of a “Left” Rabbi

The final part of the book is devoted to two polemics against two religious scholars: Rabbi Michael Lerner and Karen Armstrong. Avakian begins with the crude segue: “I want to turn now to a discussion...” of one of Lerner’s books, and proceeds to challenge the rabbi’s approach to interfaith progressive activism. (Avakian doesn’t point it out, but Lerner was a member of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement and is a long time antiwar activist as well as a fairly mainstream “public intellectual.” Cornel West has called him “the most prophetic intellectual and spiritual leader of our generation.” Several years ago he founded the Network for Spiritual Progressives. Karen Armstrong is a former Catholic nun and prolific writer on topics pertaining to world religion, including the book *A History of God* and works on Buddha and Muhammed.)

Avakian devotes 43 pages (about a fifth of the book) to Lerner’s book *The Left Hand of God: Taking*

*Back Our Country from the Religious Right.*²⁹ In that book Lerner argues that the “left” (including progressives in the Democratic Party) need to overcome the charge that they are anti-religious and compete with the religious right and its pro-war, anti-science, reactionary “family values” agenda with a spiritually-based anti-war, pro-science, progressive agenda of their own. Avakian concedes there is much on which to unite with Lerner (p. 160), but criticizes him on a number of points.

He does not understand “the fundamental contradiction of capitalism between *socialized production* and *private appropriation*” (p. 163). He articulates “more than a little romanticizing of feudalism” by writing things like: “The medieval Church, for instance, imposed ‘fair wage’ and ‘fair price’ demands on those who employed workers or sold goods at market... Care for others was a major feature of what it meant to be a Christian...”³⁰

Rabbi Lerner does not attribute “evil motives” to all those on the religious right, saying the “vast majority are motivated by principles and who want what is best for the world.” Avakian calls this “highly naïve,” repeatedly declaring that Lerner does not understand Christian Fascism (although Avakian has yet to clarify this concept himself).

Lerner supports abortion as something that should be “safe, legal, and rare,” believing that it is “very emotionally painful” for the woman involved—something Avakian says “is not true” (p. 186). Lerner as a religious man believes in “the miracle of life flowing through us,” something Avakian ridicules to accompanying “[Laughter]” (p. 187), and even “[Applause]” (p. 189).

Thus Avakian targets Lerner—who has worked with the RCP to some extent (and is a Not in Our Name signatory)—for not being an atheist, not a communist, not a supporter of the RCP’s conception of the “Christian Fascist” threat. One wonders why Avakian’s polemic made no mention of Lerner’s Zionism or support for Israel’s incorporation into NATO.

The point of the entire section appears to be that while religious believers can and must play a role in making revolution (led by the RCP), at this time—

29. New York: HarperCollins, 2006

30. Lerner, p. 59, cited by Avakian, p. 164

when common opposition to imperialist war, mounting repression at home and the meltdown of the economy provide the basis for broad alliances—Avakian wants to focus on the popularization of atheism as a defense against the (still undefined) Christian Fascist threat.

A Misunderstanding of a History of Myth

Finally, Avakian turns to Armstrong's book *A Short History of Myth* and questions her interpretation of the nature of myth.³¹ "A myth," she writes, "...is true because it is effective, not because it gives us factual information [but because it gives] us deeper insight into the meaning of life."³² Her book begins with a discussion of the Paleolithic hunt and its relationship to organized belief and ritual, examines how in the Neolithic period the earth and agricultural labor shape myth, and how religion as we know it grows out of myth from around 800 BCE.

Obviously the "truth" here is symbolic, cultural, anthropological, psychological. When she suggests that, "We are myth-making creatures," and we need myths to "help us realise the importance of compassion . . . to see beyond our immediate requirements. We need myths that help us to venerate the earth as sacred once again, instead of merely using it as a 'resource,'" she is not saying we need to literally believe in gods and goddesses but making an observation about the prevalence of myth in human history. She ends up suggesting that at present the function of myth can be fulfilled by absorption in a novel. (I would add it might be fulfilled by various irrational but powerful beliefs in contemporary political life, particularly as they pertain to leaders assigned mythical qualities)

But Avakian, uncomfortable with the idea that (as Armstrong puts it) "our mythical belief was" (note the *past* tense) "true in some way" accuses Armstrong of "pragmatism and instrumentalism," and "positing a subjective definition of truth" (p. 203). I doubt that she (or many Marxists, for that matter) will be moved by Avakian's invocation of Lenin's rejection of "philosophical relativism" as a rationale for denying any "truth" in myth. Avakian in his "Away With All Gods" campaign

simply misunderstands Armstrong's effort. It is perhaps appropriate that the volume end at this level of sophistication.

Avakian concludes with a reiteration that the theory of evolution is correct; that religion is the opium of the masses; that human nature is not fixed but changes over time; and that people can be liberated through socialist revolution. All true, certainly. But shouldn't one ask why, following the defeat of the socialist revolutions in the USSR and China, people in the former Soviet republics and in China have flocked to religious movements? Why were the efforts to inculcate atheism so disappointingly partial, and so quickly reversible? Might they have been too crudely and insensitively applied, based on imperfect analysis of this phenomenon of religious belief?

Preaching from a Pulpit of Banality

Has Avakian made any theoretical leaps in this book? Or is he rooted behind, and preaching from, a pulpit of bombastic banality? He has not convinced me that he understands the three Abrahamic religions very well, has given their study his best shot, or can empathize with those who embrace those religions in such a way as to disabuse them from their God-centered worldviews. He has not convinced me that Christian Fascists threaten the American people in the foreseeable future with theocracy or any particular people with genocide. I'm not convinced at the end of 237 pages that this book can or should become a "major social question."

The RCP has publicly acknowledged its "culture of appreciation, promotion and popularization" of Avakian. It's conducting a missionary effort to promote the author as a great thinker and leader. I guess we'll see what becomes of that.

Maybe at the end of the day Avakian believes Armstrong: "A myth...is true because it is effective." Maybe this book and campaign will indeed "emerge onto the scene with great impact." But frankly, my response to that is: [Laughter].

I'm with Bultmann. I think we need to *demythologize*. Away with all gods, indeed! And away while we're at it — away with all "condescending saviors."

31. Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2005

32. Armstrong, p. 10

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