

PREFACE

THIS IS A BOOK about truth.

In the sixth century BCE,¹ well before Socrates—even before the word *philosopher* (lover of wisdom) was coined—the Greeks were already debating what is truth. One hundred years later Parmenides took the position that what is, is, and what is not, is not. All is one, he declared, a single, eternal reality. Socrates, more circumspect, is reputed to have said, “Truth is difficult to find out. That is why I ask questions.” Plato held that truth could be reached through abstract reason, while Aristotle, the first person to develop the concept of evidence, argued that truth could be understood through observation. But whatever the starting point, the path to truth for the ancient Greek philosophers was built on reason.

At roughly the same time, a little farther to the east, the Hebrew prophets were explaining the world in terms of divine revelation. In the year 458 BCE, Ezra came back to Judah from exile in Babylonia with written authorization from the Persian emperor to teach and enforce “the law of your God which is in your hand.” What he had in his hand was the Torah, and teach it and enforce it he did, zealously. Echoing Parmenides, Ezra preached that there was indeed a single, eternal reality, and that single eternal reality was the Torah that God revealed to his chosen people, Israel.

For the past twenty-five hundred years, these have been the two major strands of thought running through Western civilization. In one camp are those who believe that truth about the world can be found through scholarly inquiry, evidence, and reason, that truth emerges through the use of the human mind. In the other camp are

those who believe that truth about the world can be found only in God's word and God's will, handed down from on high in divine revelation, and that this revealed truth trumps reason—indeed, *is* reason.

Five hundred years after Ezra, Christianity took revealed truth on a different tack, building on the Torah and the rest of the Old Testament, adding its own gospel, dogma, and doctrines, demanding unquestioning faith and threatening harsh consequences for those who dared to question. The result, notwithstanding Thomas Aquinas's efforts in the thirteenth century to reconcile Aristotelian reason with orthodox Christian doctrine, was that public debate about truth was effectively shut down for well over a thousand years. There were some stirrings in the seventeenth century, as a few philosophers of note began to question the belief that God gave the Pentateuch to Moses. But the ecclesiastical authorities moved quickly to contain these doubts, and they dealt severely with the doubters.² The rabbinate of the day was just as closed minded and took just as hard a line. When the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, a Dutch Jew, wrote that "it is clearer than the sun at noon that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses, but by someone who lived long after Moses," he was excommunicated.

Religious truth also trumped scientific fact. A notorious case involved Galileo, probably the greatest scientist of his time. The Church denounced Galileo for supporting Copernicus's heretical theory that Earth was not at the center of the universe but rather, along with all the other planets, revolved around the sun. Given the choice of recanting or going to prison (and probably to his death), Galileo readily recanted—although legend has it that when he did he added under his breath, "Eppur si muove" (and yet it moves).

Eventually cracks in the wall of religious orthodoxy began to appear. The world was changing and it was impossible for the clergy to stem the tide of biblical criticism that came with the Enlightenment and took hold firmly in the middle of the nineteenth century. With this scholarly criticism the public debate about truth began to open up.

We hear a lot today about religious fundamentalism, the literal reading of sacred texts and their infallibility as the word of God, the ultimate moral authority that determines what man should and should not do. Here in the United States the fundamentalist movement started back in the 1920s, as a reaction by some in the Protestant Church to this new biblical criticism and the “liberals” who espoused it. The fundamentalists claimed that the liberals were abandoning the gospel and, by so doing, they were betraying the true Christianity. The liberals, for their part, warned that the Church was doomed unless it adapted its anachronistic theology to the changing times. These same battle lines remain drawn to this day (although shortly after World War II the fundamentalists began calling themselves by a softer name, evangelicals).

The debate about truth has not been limited to liberal and fundamentalist Christians. Exactly the same struggle has been taking place between liberal and Orthodox Jews. The biblical criticism that began in the nineteenth century was undertaken by a number of young Jewish scholars as well, and they gave birth to the liberal Jewish movements that took hold and flourished, especially in the United States. And just as the Christian fundamentalists are still fighting liberal Christianity tooth and nail, so are the Orthodox Jews—*the Jewish fundamentalists*—fighting liberal Judaism and just as hard. Taking the same hard line as their Christian brethren, Orthodox Jews—who, like fundamentalists everywhere, maintain the unshakable conviction that it is they, and they alone, who are in sole and certain possession of The Truth and, therefore, the exemplars of a divinely ordained moral behavior—claim that liberal Jews (whom they disdainfully call “secular”) are abandoning the Torah and, by so doing, they are betraying the true Judaism.

But are they really? Are the doctrines of Orthodox Judaism really true?

The relevance of these questions goes far beyond the confines of the Jewish community. Christian fundamentalism is firmly anchored in the same literal reading of the Old Testament that is at the core of

Orthodox doctrine, and indeed would be incomprehensible without it.³ The concept of the Messiah, one of Christianity's most fundamental tenets—without which, one could reasonably argue, Christianity could not exist—comes from the Old Testament. Indeed, the whole idea of a divinely revealed truth, essential to the evangelical belief system, comes from a literal reading of the Torah. Pull up the anchor that is the literal truth of the Torah and you set adrift the whole foundation of Christian fundamentalism. Thirty years ago the French Dominican priest and biblical archeologist Roland de Vaux summed it up succinctly with this candid observation: "If the faith of Israel is not founded in history, such faith is erroneous, and, therefore, our faith is also."⁴

De Vaux's conundrum is a big deal. In 2005 the *Wall Street Journal* ran a front-page feature on how evangelical and secular organizations are slugging it out for the hearts and minds of our children. The *Journal* quoted one teenage girl, who attended a ten-thousand-member evangelical megachurch in Florida, as saying she was glad her church taught creationism because "that helps me defend my belief that evolution is false."⁵

In 2006, Kathleen Harris, at the time a congresswoman and formerly the secretary of state of Florida who came to national prominence in the disputed presidential election in 2000, was running for the Republican nomination to the Senate. In an interview with the weekly newspaper of the Florida Baptist State Convention, Harris called the separation of church and state a "lie" and warned that if we don't elect Christians, we'll end up as "a nation of secular laws [where we] are going to legislate sin."⁶

It would be a serious error to dismiss this kind of thinking as confined to the Bible Belt. Efforts to undermine the teaching of evolution are afoot in no fewer than forty states. In some public school districts even geology is under attack because its time line for Earth collides with what scripture tells us. Stem-cell research, a promising new technology that may lead to major breakthroughs in medical science, is opposed by many people (including the current administration) on the

grounds that it runs counter to their religious beliefs. In the run-up to the presidential election in 2004, some conservative bishops made national headlines when they told parishioners that a vote for John Kerry or even for candidates with Senator Kerry's policies would lead to eternal damnation.

However you come down on these issues, there is no denying that religious fundamentalism has become an increasingly potent social and political force in America today. The *Economist* of London, always a keen observer of America's political trends, ran an article in 2005 on precisely this convergence of religion and politics, concluding that "the new battleground of American politics is about religious attitudes as much as [party] affiliation."⁷ The *New York Times* writer Thomas Friedman calls attention to a "terrible trend in the world today . . . drifting toward a widespread religious and sectarian cleavage the likes of which we have not seen for a long, long time."⁸

I consider religious fundamentalism to be one of the most noxious forces in the history of mankind, and, lamentably, it is on the rise again. Not a day passes that we don't witness Islamic fundamentalists wreaking havoc somewhere in the world. Here at home, we see Christian fundamentalists (now estimated at about a quarter of the electorate) elbowing their way into a powerful position on the American political landscape, with potentially far-reaching, deleterious consequences. Orthodox Jews, the Jewish fundamentalists, are also becoming more aggressive—more subtly here, more openly in Israel—but perhaps for fear of being labeled an anti-Semite there is little serious discussion of it.⁹ I am a Jewish American myself, but I don't like the Orthodox trying to turn Israel into a Jewish Iran any more than I like evangelicals such as Kathleen Harris trying to turn the United States into a Christian Iran.

Now you can analyze to death the impact of religious fundamentalism and bemoan the creeping loss of people's inherent freedoms. But the *real* debate—the one I attempt to provoke in this book—should be about the truth of the whole belief system that impels the fundamentalists to think and act the way they do. And to get to the

truth, you have to drill down deep, through the layers of fundamentalist rhetoric, into the bedrock of their dogma. Only then will you be in a position to make an informed, reasoned judgment as to whether or not their arguments are honest and logical and whether or not their doctrines are true. If you conclude that their doctrines are *not* true, then no matter what they say, no matter how they frame their arguments, no matter how much they invoke God's name and God's will, it would make no sense for you to believe them. And if you don't believe them, it would make even less sense for you to exchange much of your personal freedom for the straightjacket of enforced obedience to strict religious law.

I wrote this book to provoke readers, Jew and non-Jew alike, to step back and ask themselves a very simple question: *Does all this religious fervor really make any sense?* And if it doesn't, what is it doing—and what does it have the potential to do—to my life? My own answer to this question is what this book is all about. In the pages that follow I build an argument to demonstrate that the doctrines of Orthodox Judaism, like the doctrines of religious fundamentalism of all stripes, are false and make no sense at all.

You might think that most people already know that Orthodox Jews and evangelical Christians (let alone Islamic fundamentalists) are misguided zealots, and you don't need a book to prove it. This might have been true twenty-five years ago, but it is not true today. Yes, many people do recoil instinctively from religious fundamentalism. But it is a fact that increasing numbers of Americans do not. Just look at the spectacular growth of the evangelical megachurches.¹⁰ There has even been a surprising backsliding in Reform Judaism, away from the emphasis on personal choice that has always been one of its salient characteristics.

An unstable world in which individuals seem to have less and less control over their lives has led more and more people to seek refuge in the security blanket of a fundamentalist belief system that explains that what is happening is God's will. Liberal Christians and Jews may dismiss the fundamentalists as religious nuts, but that is a mistake.

The irreverent iconoclast Christopher Hitchens has declared that “what can be asserted without evidence can also be dismissed without evidence.”¹¹ Not anymore. Today we need to be able to counter the fundamentalists’ arguments not with what we feel instinctively, but with hard facts.

If we cavalierly dismiss religious fundamentalism without taking a closer look at the phenomenon and where it all comes from, we do so at our peril. And where it all comes from, the acknowledged common pillar on which the belief system of evangelical Christianity as well as Orthodox Judaism is based, is the purported truth of the Old Testament and, more specifically, of its first five books, the Torah. Hence, any sincere quest for the truth must begin by submitting the fundamentalists’ literal reading of the Torah to the twin tests of empirical evidence and legitimate principles of reasoning.

Nicholas Kristof, another writer for the *New York Times*, makes this insightful observation: “One of the biggest mistakes liberals have made has been to forfeit battles in which faith plays a crucial role. Religion has always been a central current of American life, and it is becoming more important in politics because of the new Great Awakening unfolding across the United States. . . . When liberals take on conservative Christians, it tends to be with insults—by deriding them as jihadists and fleeing the field. That’s a mistake.”¹²

Commenting on Kathleen Harris’s impolitic declarations, Leonard Pitts, a columnist for the *Miami Herald*, issues a similar warning: “Maybe your instinct is to laugh at [Harris] and move on. That would be a mistake. Because here’s the thing about what she told the newspaper: She meant it. . . . And I doubt she’s the only one. The forces of Christian fundamentalism have made terrific inroads in the Republican mainstream over the past quarter-century. Some would argue that [now] they *are* the Republican mainstream.”¹³ A few days after Pitts wrote this column, Kathleen Harris handily won Florida’s Republican nomination for senator.

The forces of Jewish fundamentalism are no longer benign, either. Possibly as a reaction to their fears that assimilation and intermarriage

pose a serious threat to Jewish survival, the Orthodox have stepped up their efforts to convert non-Orthodox Jews, to recruit them to become “returnees”—without regard for the trauma such a conversion often brings to the liberal Jewish families involved.

Perhaps on a visit to Israel the prospective convert is approached by a friendly fellow who (taking a leaf out of the Moonies’ playbook) invites him to dinner with “a nice group of people you’ll really like.” Or he may be here in America, possibly feeling low or alienated for one reason or another, and is approached by what the Orthodox euphemistically call an “outreach” organization. But whatever the venue and whatever the technique, it is a siren song that lures the unsuspecting into a sticky web of claims about God’s word and God’s will, designed to convince them that Orthodoxy is the only viable path to Jewish fulfillment and salvation. In the 1960s there was a popular Broadway musical called *Stop the World I Want To Get Off*. In a very real sense, this is what the Orthodox are offering the convert. But before he stops the world and gets off, wouldn’t you think he would first want to have as clear an idea as possible of what he would be getting off into and, more important, whether or not it made any sense to do so?

There is a minor industry out there turning out books, monographs, lectures, tapes, Internet support groups, you name it, all aimed at convincing the secular that the Torah is the true word of God. I have taken three publications as representative of the genre: *On Judaism* by Rabbi Emanuel Feldman, *Choose Life* by Rabbi Ezriel Tauber, and *Living Up . . . to the Truth* by Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb. Orthodox proselytizers often give these three tracts to those they are trying to convert. I shall assess what each of these men is saying—and pay particular attention to Gottlieb, because he claims that the literal truth of the Torah can be proven by reason and logic. When I present their views, however, it is important for the reader to keep in mind that I do not do so simply to offer for debate the opinions of a few individuals. I present the views of these three Orthodox writers as concrete points of reference that define the doctrine and rationale of

Jewish fundamentalism. What these men claim is true is what mainstream Orthodoxy claims is true. And when I offer evidence to counter what these men are telling us, I am not merely disputing the views held by three rabbis. I am disputing the dogma of Old Testament fundamentalism.

When assessing the validity of Orthodox dogma, I have sought the most reliable empirical evidence from the most credible sources. I will present, at times extensively, the findings and conclusions of the most authoritative scientists and scholars in their respective fields of inquiry. Throughout the book I also refer to contemporary articles published in major newspapers. This introduces pertinent current commentary on the basic themes I develop, grounding them in the real world in which the reader lives today.

One final observation. At first blush it might appear that by dismantling the core doctrines of Orthodox Judaism—and, by extension, of religious fundamentalism writ large—my purpose is to discredit all religious belief. The reader will soon discover that this is not so. Orthodox Judaism is not authentic Judaism, as the Orthodox claim, any more than Christian fundamentalism is authentic Christianity, as the evangelicals claim. The reader does not face a choice that is limited to fundamentalism (I believe all of it) or atheism (I believe none of it). Piety is not a license to run other people's lives,¹⁴ but if one so chooses, religion can play a positive role in one's life—sociologically, philosophically, and psychologically. It's all in how you look at it, and what I am proposing is that you look at it from a new and different perspective. I bring all this together in the book's last chapter, "Understanding the Religious Experience." Athens and Jerusalem need not be at loggerheads.

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