SLIPPING INTO HORROR:
A Theological Approach to the Underside of Life

Wesley J. Wildman

I. INTRODUCTION

The underside of individual experience and social life is the nexus of events and behaviors that lead with horrific frequency to tragedy, depravity, oppression, and cruelty, from tormented psyches to institutional corruption, from moral degradation to socially sanctioned exploitation. This underside encompasses human evil and human suffering and the sometimes ambiguous relationship between the two. Religious traditions and texts grapple practically and intellectually with this underside in varied ways — and they have a double effect. On the one hand, they express sensitivity to the evil and chaos of human life, and they cultivate communal empathy toward people who suffer as a result of it. On the other hand, these ritual, ethical, and doctrinal exertions serve to inure religious communities to the harsher realities of life, either through eschatological escapism, habitual distancing, or systematic descriptions of life that render its underside unimportant.

The saints, sages, and prophets of every culture may be able to acknowledge the underside of life and not wither in horror, but most people need to keep it out of sight as much as possible in order to function effectively. Cultural activities that foster insensitivity to the underside of life therefore serve a useful function for the individuals and societies they influence. This is part of the explanation for large-scale social expressions of denial, including dangerous scapegoating mechanisms. But the insensitivities of

Wesley J. Wildman is Associate Professor of Theology and Ethics at Boston University.

Soundings 84.1-2 (Spring/Summer 2001). ISSN 0038-1861.
denial, displaced rage, and vengeance also retard attempts to transform social conditions.

II. AMBIGUOUS UNDERCURRENTS IN RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES

Many religious texts encourage reflection about the underside of life. Each of the texts to be considered here situates the underside of life in the background, while in the foreground it presents a narrative that addresses questions about the origin, nature, and overcoming of suffering and evil. Certain traditional lines of interpretation of each of these narratives lead to theoretical construals of the human condition that, in different ways, both cultivate empathy and inure communities to the horrific underside of human experience and social life.

The Story of Adam in the Qur‘an

First, consider the Qur‘anic material concerning Adam. Adam is created by Allah to be viceroy on earth and given special knowledge not possessed by the angels. Allah thus enters into a primordial covenant with Adam. Allah demands that the angels prostrate themselves before Adam, and all do so except Iblis, who dissents out of pride. Iblis is cursed by Allah and banished, but he is permitted — and thus designated by Allah — to fill the role of the enemy of Adam and his offspring, the one who sets snares and tries to turn people away from the worship of Allah. Allah warns Adam and his wife about the enemy he has established for them and permits them to eat from all but one of the trees in their garden home. However, Iblis convinces them to eat from the forbidden tree, and when Adam does so he breaks the primordial divine covenant of obedience to and love of Allah. Nevertheless, Allah relents and forgives the error. As he originally intended, Allah establishes Adam and his progeny as viceroys on earth, promising them a pleasant habitation and warning of enmity among them. Allah also promises guidance so that they need not go astray again.

The story presents Allah as establishing human beings, unlike the angels, to be creatures blessed with special spiritual knowledge and responsibility for the earth and to exist in moral tension by virtue of being under the divine command. Human beings, in this account, have the peculiar challenge of being under the divine imperative to be perfect, even as the rest of cre-
atation actually is perfect. Humanity is not essentially flawed as a result of being suspended in this moral tension, nor does the almost negligible mistake of Adam and his wife plunge humanity into a disastrous fallen state. Rather, Allah forgives them, and the story of the establishment of human beings as the earth’s viceroys continues, as does the divine imperative, the primordial covenant, and the promised guidance of Allah, expressed preeminently in the testimony of the blessed prophet and the Qur’an.

This story of failure hovers in the background of the portrayal of humanity in the Qur’an: the primordial covenant is always vulnerable to being broken by human inattention to the law. The misery of human life receives its final resolution in the vision of Allah mercifully and justly making decisive judgment at an appointed future time. But the reason why such misery is even possible finds expression in the mysterious story of Adam’s mistake. It was a tiny slip — a slip due mostly to the cunning and trickery of Iblis in his divinely appointed role as the opponent of humanity. The smallness and almost accidental character of Adam’s mistake seem crucial to the narrative. A huge mistake would portray Adam as a miscreant, the primordial covenant as futile, and Allah’s plans as easily derailed. And no mistake at all would make the misery of life seem arbitrary and Allah’s creation an exercise in cruelty. The mistake has to be a tiny slip to keep the narrative in balance.

Why should Adam slip in this way at all? The story explains this by means of the divine designation of Adam to be like the rest of his race: suspended in moral tension. There is a principle of plenitude hovering in the narrative here. Allah fills every niche of being in creation. The angels are perfect and experience no moral tension; other creatures are not capable even of sensing a moral dimension. But human beings are the ones who enter into a primordial covenant with Allah to strive after perfection. Out of the divinely transcendent wisdom, Allah, who “disdaineth not even to coin the similitude of a gnat” (2.26), fills heaven and earth with every possible kind of creature. When the angels question Allah about his intention to make creatures of the human kind, creatures who will shed blood and cause a multitude of miseries, Allah simply replies that “Surely I know that which ye know not” (2.30). Even Iblis fulfills a designated role in the divinely ordained economy of being. Thus, in accordance with this princi-
ple of plenitude, every ontological-moral possibility is realized in creation. It follows that the slip of Adam and his wife is explained, first, with reference to their lack of wisdom in listening to Iblis; second, with reference to Iblis’s role as the enemy of humanity; third, with reference to Adam’s constitution as suspended in moral tension through being under the divine command; fourth, with reference to the principle of plenitude; and finally, with reference to the transcendent divine will that is beyond all human reckoning.

On the one hand, the overwhelming character of divine transcendence potentially fosters insensitivity to the horrors of life by providing an explanation for them that ultimately lies deeply beneath every other explanation. Such horrors fade into insignificance, and so out of human concern, when they are viewed in the light of divine glory. Furthermore, what can be done about such horrors when their possibility springs from the transcendent divine will? Yet, on the other hand, the divine command directs our attention to the horrors of life and demands that we overcome them by not making things worse and by helping to ease burdens where we can. Through its emphatic affirmation of the goodness and mercy of Allah, and its careful stipulations about personal holiness and social propriety, the Qur’anic narrative stimulates empathy toward those threatened by the dark underside of life.

This narrative has four features that are typical of the others I will mention in a moment. First, the story encourages both insensitivity and a recognition of evil and empathy toward its victims. Second, the narrative turns on a slip or mistake that is momentous in significance yet vanishingly small in magnitude. Third, the smallness of the slip — its almost accidental character — plays a crucial role in the narrative by blocking the assignment of total blame to any of the characters in the story. And fourth, there is a theological rationalization for the slip; in this case, although alternatives in Islamic thought exist, I have mentioned the one that takes the form of a blame-deflecting principle of plenitude.

*The Fall of Adam and Eve in the Torah*

As a second example, consider the garden story of Genesis, and especially the interpretation of this story offered by the sec-
ond-century CE anti-Jewish arch-heretic Marcion (whose thought we can reconstruct through Tertullian’s Against Marcion). Like the Qur’anic version, the garden story in Genesis contains an apparently arbitrary decree — “you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (2.17a) — which is violated by a curious, innocent pair. In the Genesis version, however, the devastating consequences seem totally out of proportion to their juvenile adventure. It seems to be the command rather than the eating that awakens the knowledge of good and evil, which makes the creator-God seem most unjust in this narrative. Yet the creator-God’s hands are clearly tied, so to speak, for the human creatures have moved into a world in which freedom is possible. Accordingly, he spells out the consequences of their action in the form of curses, tries to put a good face on it all by showing them how to make clothes, and tosses them out of the garden.

Consciousness of the evil underside of life and empathy toward its victims are encouraged in this narrative by the aura of divine command and concern that both punishes and teaches. Empathy is also fostered by the picturesque contrast between “before” and “after” that is elaborated as the story proceeds through the various struggles of the wayward human beings. Insensitiveness to the underside of life is fostered by the apparently inexplicable arbitrariness of the divine command and the suggestion of callousness about the horrific consequences for humanity. If the consequences were going to be that bad, we might think, then perhaps the creator-God ought at least to have posted a reminder sign or set up a fence around the tree with the dangerous fruit. And once again, as in the Qur’anic narrative, there is a slip underneath all of this: Adam and Eve err almost trivially — and yet portentously — because they have been tricked by Satan. It is not really the creator-God’s fault, it is not really Satan’s fault, and it is not really the fault of the human creatures, but it happens nonetheless. The narrative is rendered awkward by its attempt to account for the monstrous consequences of this slip.

Marcion apparently sensed the problem with this story and put his own spin on it. Beginning with a dualistic distinction between a creator-God and savior-God, Marcion seems to have regarded the matter-oriented creator-God’s command not to eat as unjust, and he thus made the serpent a hero, the symbol of a spiritually oriented savior-God who resists the fickle arbitrariness of the cre-
ator-God and who leads the duped human beings into salvation precisely through their knowledge. Marcion resolved the ambiguity surrounding the cause of the slip by bluntly and dualistically blaming the creator-God, whom he understood to be the God of the Old Testament, the God obsessed with laws, and whom he opposed to the God of Christianity, the God of grace and love. This is one way to characterize his heretical impulse. Though it is not much remembered as a point of doctrinal debate, the gradually emerging mainstream of the early Christian tradition seems to have been committed to maintaining descriptions of this primordial slip that are neutral as regards the cause of the slip — it is neither wholly God’s fault nor wholly the fault of humanity. This is one way to understand the importance within Christianity of the doctrine of original sin: fate and inherent human weakness mitigate human responsibility.

Once again, therefore, we see the four characteristics of this family of narratives. First, such narratives cultivate both empathy and insensitivity toward the underside of life. Second, they turn on a minuscule slip. Third, the slip’s smallness plays an essential role in the narrative by blocking decisive assignment of blame. And fourth, there is a theological rationalization for the consequences of the slip that, in the case of most Christian commentators (though not Marcion), takes the form of a doctrine of the fall. It is important here to note in passing that Jewish theological rationalizations of the consequences of the slip are generally quite different from Christian ones and are rather varied among themselves.

**The Fateful Swim in the Epic of Gilgamesh**

Small slips make a difference elsewhere, too. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, after a long series of adventures, Gilgamesh is told about a plant that is the secret of everlasting life. He finds the plant and begins the journey home. Along the way, he takes a relaxing swim only to have the plant stolen by a water serpent. No matter what human beings do, it seems, they cannot get out from under the burden imposed upon them by the gods. This wonderful adventure fosters empathy for the tragedy of life through its detailed accounts of human suffering and struggle and by means of narrative encouragement of our identification with the hero. Yet fate is always darkly hovering, and the futility of resistance saps
courage and determination and fosters passive acceptance of, or indifference to, the underside of life. The narrative slip takes the form of the loss of the special plant, and the smallness of the slip emphasizes the untraceable inevitability of fate. The rationalization for the slip is suggested in the story clearly enough: though the power of the gods can be resisted temporarily by human ingenuity and determination, the gods always find a way to interfere in human affairs so as to protect their own interests. Put differently, the slip illustrates the way the power of human beings — which itself is unaccountably hard to understand in view of the power of the gods — suddenly and inexplicably gives way to the intrusion of fate.

Gautama’s Discovery of Sickness, Decrepitude, and Death

Finally, recall that in Bhuddist scriptures, a small slip in the form of inexplicable encounters with strangers allows Gautama to encounter sickness, decrepitude, death, and the possibility of the monastic life. His father was scrupulous in his efforts to shield Gautama from such knowledge. He wanted his son to be a great ruler, but according to a wise seer who spoke to the King on the occasion of the child’s birth, Gautama was to be a great spiritual adventurer (1.54ff). Because of this, and out of love for his son, Gautama’s father spared no expense in surrounding his son with all the pleasures of the ruler’s life, thereby hoping to prevent him from learning about that alternative future (2.25, 3.3-6, and so on). Even so, thanks to the seemingly miraculously intervention of the gods (according to Asvaghosha’s version of the story), Gautama encounters the strangers and is driven to seek enlightenment (3.26-62).

The narrative slip in this case is the invisibly small cracks in the shield built around the young boy’s consciousness, and the events that somehow manage to penetrate those cracks and trigger a cascading chain of transformations. The slip must be small to express the fact that the causes of the changes in Gautama’s consciousness are finally untraceable. We cannot identify them any more than we can say just what it is that really causes us to wake from sleeping. In due course, this narrative gives rise to some Buddhists’ philosophical descriptions of the nature of conscious, descriptions of the ultimate unreality of the dependently co-arising world. At the most fundamental level, the
slip expresses the simple inevitability of enlightenment when it occurs. Reaching enlightenment is like waking. The slip from sleep to waking is necessary and momentous in significance, yet it is untraceable and therefore uncontrollable and unavoidable.

This story encourages empathy toward the victims of the underside of life through its poignant account of the contrast between Gautama's life of comfort and the suffering strangers, and through the narrative accidents that create the possibility of those encounters. It also fosters insensitivity toward the effects of the underside of life through its suggestion of the unreality of the world and its insistence on the need to escape its delusions. The rationalizations of the slip in subsequent Buddhist thought reinforce this dual effect.

III. SLIPPING AND THE UNDERSIDE OF LIFE

The Narrative Mechanism

The metaphor of a "slip" — a near-accidental mistake, apparently unimportant in itself but with tragic or far-reaching consequences — expresses a conceptual pattern that is essential to the integrity of each narrative I have discussed. Of course, this slip is developed differently in each narrative. However, the conceptual pattern is similar, and it is intelligible as a strategy for accounting for the underside of life without taking the religiously perilous path of "over-blaming" either the mysterious divine origins of human life or human beings themselves.

Note how small this slip is: it must be infinitesimally small, because it must not function as a causal explanation, lest the narrative assert causal connections that give grounds either for ascribing responsibility for the horrors of life to the divine, or for assigning to human beings more blame for their misery than is just. We cannot blame the divine without being unfaithful, nor can we blame ourselves unduly without self-betrayal. The vanishing smallness of the slip thus serves to deflect the possibility of one-sided blame. It is a non-explanatory explanation.

Narratives are ideally suited to express the non-explanatory explanations that are slips because the capacities of dynamism and indirection possessed by stories are better than the relatively stable terms of theory for suggesting natural trajectories of thought. It is these trajectories that lead the imagination gradually through the series of approximations necessary for expressing vanishingly
small things of great significance. By contrast, theories are better than stories at detecting bias in and making corrections to the processes of world-making in which stories play such a key role. Thus, while this essay began with a discussion of slips in stories, it ends by asking more theoretically framed questions about how such stories influence religious attitudes toward the underside of life, which are a vital part of world-making for every society.

I have argued that each of these narratives fosters both sensitivity and insensitivity toward the underside of life. I have also given examples of the way that the notion of a slip and its attendant rationalizations reinforce this dual process of simultaneously intensifying empathy and decreasing sensitivity. In closing, I wish to argue three further points. First, the dual character of this process is essential for social stability. Second, the importance of narrative slips derives in part from the efficiency with which they foster this dual process; this is the reason that narrative slips appear in stories from many parts and periods of the world, and the reason why stories embodying narrative slips play such an important role in religious world-making. Third, in our time, religion is not only a crucial institution for supporting the dual process of increasing empathy and decreasing sensitivity in society at large, it is also the most efficient means of cultivating the maturity needed to face the underside of life without the aid of psychological mechanisms such as denial and transference.

The Interests of Social Stability

It is difficult to make generalizations about societies because they vary greatly, but plausible generalizations are possible, especially if we limit their scope to modern societies. In this case, I think it can safely be said that societies cannot afford to let empathy become too pronounced because the underside of life is too painful and the consequences of individuals' psychic needs for self-protection are extremely dangerous. Empathy promotes close bonds with some people but encourages hatred and aggression toward others. Release mechanisms are necessary when awareness of tragedy and horror is high, as the phenomena of lynching, witch-hunts, terrorist violence, and racial prejudice illustrate (though they illustrate other social dynamics as well). The limited cultivation of insensitivity toward the underside of
life and its unfortunate victims serves preemptively to reduce the need for social release mechanisms.

By the same token, modern societies cannot afford to let insensitivity become too pronounced. Hellish expressions of suffering and exploitation typically have a socio-economic and often also a racial cast, and too much insensitivity amplifies class and racial tensions, potentially to the point of forcing revolutionary impulses into the open. Social chaos seems to follow whenever empathy and insensitivity become unbalanced.

Now, it is one thing to speak pragmatically of the interests of social stability, and it is quite another to speak of what is good and true and beautiful. Insensitivity to the underside of human life and its hapless victims, while understandable in both its psychological and social expressions, is still morally repugnant. It is a sign of human depravity every bit as much as is the violence we visit upon each other. It is also an indication of the inescapably frustrating and corrupt character of human social organization. Before I speak further about the dubious moral status of a balance between empathy and insensitivity, however, it is necessary to clarify the role of narrative slips in the maintenance of social stability.

The Role of Slips and Their Rationalization in World-Making

One of the reasons sensitivity to the underside of life is so difficult is that it is extremely painful and alienating to be a victim. Another reason is that there is so often little to be done to help. Empathy that leads not to action but to silence is agonizing in its own peculiar way. In view of the intransigent and complex character of suffering in modern societies, therefore, it is no wonder that empathy is difficult to achieve. It follows that sensitivity and empathy are least painful and most widespread when rationales for action, emotional postures, and social policies are self-evident. This is the case precisely when there is a clear object of blame for the myriad forms of suffering that so dominate the underside of life, be it God, the devil, nature, human weakness, a conscienceless villain, a class of powerful people, a race — anything specific enough to allow a strategy of struggle which promises to improve the conditions of life.

All of this means that empathy unchecked by sturdy social analyses very often produces fanatics who find strategies for ac-
tion shockingly easy to determine. In much of pre-World War II Europe, for example, a kind of nationalistic, mutual empathy for each others' struggles led many Europeans to believe that the Jews stood in the way of the realization of their national, economic, and personal goals, and this, in turn, permitted the most fanatical of them to formulate and implement a staggeringly simple strategy for dealing with their problem. Likewise, a profound empathetic connection to the unborn babies aborted by doctors in the United States has led the most fanatical proponents of the "right to life" to decide that the best way to protect such babies is to murder doctors who perform abortions. Any amount of human-heartedness or sound social analysis would have avoided both strategies, but fanaticism has no time for such abstract virtues; the confidence forged by empathy seems self-confirming, even to the point of delusion.

Insensitivity to the underside of life is also ethically dangerous. In stories that reflect such insensitivity, blame is once again important, but these stories do not emphasize the guilt of a particular party — that leads to action. Rather, they exculpate individuals from blame and shield them from involvement. The audible beating in the next apartment that never gets reported is the fault of a vague "somebody else" and so the problem of everyone or anyone else but me.

Thus, empathy and insensitivity are dangerous reactions to the underside of life because of the ease with which they are transmuted into fanaticism and passive negligence, respectively. When stories with the narrative slips to which I have drawn attention play dominant roles in world-making, however, these extreme possibilities are muted. That is because these narrative slips are non-explanatory explanations that leave no causal traces and so block both the easy assignment of blame and the facile exculpation of oneself from responsibility for the horrors of the underside of life. We slip into horror together, and everyone and everything is involved.

The Dangers and Virtues of Contemporary Religious Institutions

While narrative slips have their virtues, therefore, many stories play into the world-making constructions of the underside of life that make social violence all too easy. Religious narratives engaging this dark underside using the narrative device of a slip might
have the potential to check fanaticism and negligence, but in our own time they are very often not influential enough to do so. Here, then, are two invaluable social virtues of contemporary religious institutions. First, to the extent that they model their proclamations after critical reinterpretations of their own ancient wisdom — a crucial qualification — they offer a non-explanatory explanation for the underside of life that has the socially beneficial effect of increasing empathy and decreasing sensitivity. Second, they thus throw soothing oil on the chaotic waters of social life by inhibiting the dangerously extreme manifestations of empathy and insensitivity. World-making narratives guided by ancient stories about the underside of life are among the traditional ways to secure these virtues, and they remain important for that purpose today.

By the same token, the dangers of such world-making stories are plain: narratives about the underside of life that are subtly ambiguous about identifying the final cause of the problem tend also to make people under their sway sympathetic but slow to act, kindhearted but morally lukewarm, all good-natured constancy but no courageous convictions — easy targets, then, for a Kierkegaard or a Nietzsche. Moreover, by becoming so effective at supporting ordinary social processes, religious institutions usually become thoroughly entangled in them to the point that they get in the way of the very transformations for which they stand, and become corrupt — easy targets, it would seem, for a Voltaire or a Marx.

There is more to be said, however, and here at last we move away from pragmatic social considerations. Lukewarm, passionless goodness marks out both the socially ideal peon and the spiritual weakling; these are the characteristics of souls lacking a maturely developed capacity to face the horror of life without something to blame, lacking a vent for their frustration and fear, without a way to assure themselves that they are not responsible. But religious institutions at their best have a dynamic character that transforms souls. In fact, religious practice helps people engage more and more of reality in ever richer and more significant ways by means of complex and powerful systems of symbols. The crafting of the soul that these practices permit has been a common and effective way of cultivating the maturity needed to confront the monstrous underside of life without panicking, to
empathize with victims of absurd brutality without becoming fanatical, to transform our own turgid traditions, and courageously to devise and implement the complex strategies needed to address even the most intractable agonies of the human condition. The saints and sages of all traditions are our models for such efforts. In spite of their moral ambiguity as institutions, religious groups continue to produce many such remarkable people. It is with their inspiration, and not hopelessly, that we slip, to suffer and to change, into horror.

NOTES

1. All parenthetical references to the Qur’an are drawn from Pickthall’s The Meaning of the Glorious Koran. For a discussion of material about Adam, see especially 2.27ff, 7.7ff, 15.26ff, and 29.115ff.
2. See Genesis chapters 2 and 3. All biblical quotations are drawn from the Holy Bible, New International Version.
3. Tertullian frequently attacks Marcion’s two-Gods thesis and his assignment of the good-God role to the savior-God (who is the God of Jesus), in contrast to the creator-God (who is the legalistic God of the Jewish religion). See, for example, Against Marcion Book 1, Chapters 2-7.
4. See especially tablet XI, lines 257-91, on page 98.
5. This story is related in a number of places, but most famously and popularly in the Buddhacarita of Avaghosha. See especially books I-V at pages 1-61.

WORKS CITED