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FIDO'S FIGHT



To Sammy, licking plates clean in dog heaven.

AUM MANI PADME HUM

Avalokiteshvara

WOOF, WOOF-WOOF WOOF-WOOF-WOOF!

Sammy

As I write, highly civilised human beings are flying overhead,
trying to kill me.²⁰

George Orwell

WOOF, WOOFITY WOOF-WOOF WOOF

Sammy

My friend's dog Hempy was an eye-clawing, shirt-tearing, computer-licking monster. He was all animal, no human social protocols at all, and his master was only slightly better house-trained. We were once invited to a harvest festival in Yoshino village, where two distinct groups were celebrating: organic farmers in wellies, and beardy Rastas in big hats. For some reason, Yoshino houses a number of Orientals who claim the divinity of Haile Selassie, who cook fish tea and ackie, and who have invested years into forcing their straight hair into unconvincing dreadlocks. Perhaps the mystique of the unfamiliar worked on them, in the same way that it inspired a Jamaican reggae star to choose the name Ninja Man. (In a complicated reciprocation, there is now a Japanese dancehall DJ calling himself Nanja Man.)

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After a day of wholesome harvest feasting, the bong-heads sneaked off to sample a different harvest. The boss Rasta skinned up solidly for three hours before dropping his pace. Less disciplined was Hempy, who broke his leash and attacked a smaller dog by the name of Ganja. Ganja never stood a chance.

No doubt there was some important pheromonal issue at stake, but from my perspective, they were just dogs fighting. From a dog's eye view, our disputes must be similarly meaningless. Fighting the infidel, fighting to liberate the oppressed or to right a wrong, fighting for anything other than bones and boning bitches would mean nothing at all.

Dogs are slaves to their noses, driven wild by a bitch in heat. We are separated from the physical world by a world of abstract ideas, and we claim this makes us rational, but dogs with their noses to the ground cause much less trouble than we monkeys, and they almost never kill each other. We regularly kill others en masse for wearing different uniforms, and are rewarded for it with medals. We even kill ourselves. Lemmings sometimes kill themselves by mistake, when their migration instinct is confused, but we do it on purpose, during existential crises. Meaning exerts a powerful force. Three words can suddenly change everything:

'I love you.'

'Ready... Aim... Fire!'

We think we are the dog's bollocks, but from a planetary perspective we are a plague worse than locusts or rabid dogs. We think we own the place and can do what we want with it, but no dog ever claimed more land than he could perfume. There was no canine King Philip of Spain and Jerusalem. We are far more territorial than dogs, but unlike dogs we rationalise our greed.

In 1492, a small Spanish force took the blessing of the Pope and sailed off for the New World. The natives they met knew nothing of this holy book that held Europe under its sway, and neither did they know the magic of steel. Columbus noted:

They do not bear arms, and do not know them for I showed them a sword - they took it by the edge and cut themselves.²¹

The island of Hispaniola had an estimated population of 300,000 when they arrived. Within four years a third were dead, and fifty years after landfall a cleric doubted whether 500 remained. This stirred him to poetry:

To use gunpowder against pagans is to offer incense to the Lord.²²

As well as gunpowder and steel, Old World disease played a large part in the conquest. The plague decimating the heathen was seen as the hand of God helping the crusade,²³ and Christian soldiers reciprocated by preaching the Good News wherever they went.

Things were more complicated for North American pioneers a century later. They were mostly Protestants, and all this divine authority humbug reeked of the Antichrist Pope, so they rationalized their land-grab:

These savages have no particular propriety in any part or parcel of that country, but only a general residency there, as wild beasts in the forest; for they range and wander up and down the country without any law or government, being led only by their own lusts and sensuality. There is not *meum* and *tuum* [mine and thine] amongst them. So that if the whole land should be taken from them, there is not a man that can complain of any particular wrong done unto him.²⁴

The resulting genocide was far more thorough than in Latin America. Today there are large Indian populations in South and Central America, and plenty of Aztec, Mayan and Inca blood in Latin American veins, but the DNA of the few North American tribes that survived is largely confined to their reservations. Why were the Protestants so much better at genocide?

What was the difference between the Spanish devils and the pale-faced warriors of the Mayflower? The main theological difference is the matter of transubstantiation. A Catholic, especially a sixteenth century Catholic, was led to believe that some hocus-pocus occurred under the consecrated hands of the priest during Mass, and the bread and wine **became** the body and blood of Christ. Protestants, however, stated in sober tones that the bread and wine **symbolised** the body and blood. Catholics today still keep it real, with 'genuine' chippings from the cross and filings from St. Peter's



Conquistadors arrive in South America

chains in their churches, and enchanted fetishes such as the plastic Mary-shaped bottle of holy water with a screw-top head my Irish friend always carries. Roman Catholicism is a romantic and raw affair, with demons to exorcise, confession to make and penitence to pay, whereas Protestantism is more sophisticated and sensible. Protestant rituals and churches are less extravagant, the flock is expected to read *The Bible* and ponder its meaning rather than listen to scary stories about saints with spears in their eyes or worms wriggling in their flesh. The Spanish expected to find a terrestrial paradise

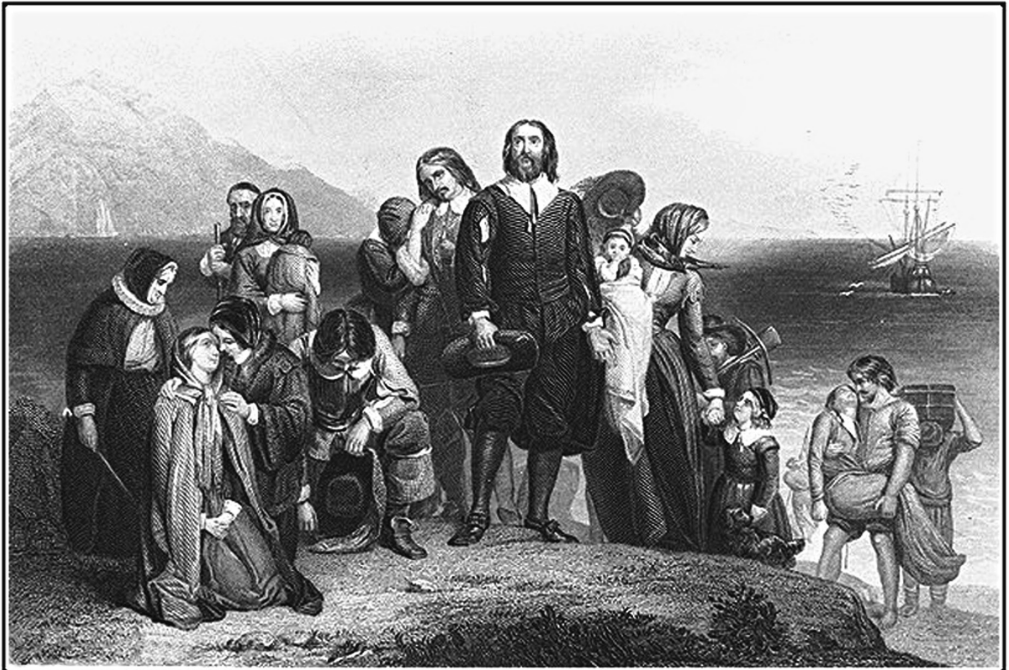
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in the New World, where Judas went for his annual holiday from Hell, with mermaids and wonderful animals, with trees hung with jewels and gold everywhere.²⁵ The Puritan pioneers planned to build New Jerusalem themselves.

The Spanish and Portuguese took their abstract construction (the Catholic church) west with a zealous agenda, conquering, stealing, and deporting “in the name of the Holy Trinity, as many slaves as could be sold”,²⁶ but somewhere along the line their resolve softened. Perhaps they fell in love, as Mediterraneans are wont to do. Even right at the beginning, Europeans had a soft spot for the natives. Columbus noted:

They are the best people in the world and above all the gentlest - without knowledge of what is evil - they do not murder or steal ... they love their neighbours as themselves ... They would make fine servants. With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.²⁷

From the early years of the mainland campaign, Catholics were converting as well as killing and enslaving, and taking lovers, beginning with Cortez himself, who fell in love with his interpreter. The Indian came to be seen as a “natural child” to be educated.²⁸ The natives, the new-comers and their African slaves mixed traditions and genes, producing beautiful religious art, cracking music, and some stunning women a few hundred years down the line. They also left all sorts of funky theological syncretisms, including Voodoo, Santeria, Candomblé, and a thread leading to Daime, of which we will hear more.



Puritans arrive in North America

The Puritan pioneers carried an even more convoluted belief system, not only symbolic but cognizant of the symbolism. They took their *super*-abstract conception to the New World and took over. They were moved not by the Holy Spirit but by the frontier spirit. There was much less poking Pocahontas. They barely mixed, and they did not convert. They ensured the Indian had a steady supply of whisky, and carried out their genocide with scientific precision, exterminating the buffalo, force-marching Indians to barren land, making treaties like civilised men and breaking them like Machiavellian princes.

Twenty-one years after Catholics made landfall, the Pope declared that savages must henceforth be considered human beings, and later threatened with excommunication anyone who enslaved them.²⁹ North Americans were still justifying the tense relations with their neighbours 150 years after they arrived, vilifying “the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.”³⁰

The line above is from *The Declaration of Independence* of 1776. This document commemorates when North Americans turned against the divinely sanctioned king in favour of “the authority, of the good people of these colonies.” Humanist politics was born, and God himself became a rationalist:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness³¹

Once the United State of Mind was made up, the decision stuck for centuries. By the time American rationalism had become charitable enough to rethink its history, the tribes were confined to a few hundred reservations and their culture was all but dead. Senator Henry Daws visited the Cherokee Nation in the 1880s:

there was not a family in that whole nation that had not a home of its own... not a pauper... it built its own schools and hospitals. Yet the defect of the system was apparent. They have got as far as they can go, because they own their land in common... here is not enterprise to make your home any better than that of your neighbours. Here is no selfishness, which is at the bottom of civilisation.³²

We have long been selfish, but as the power at our disposal increases, selfishness becomes more dangerous. We have always been the only creatures clever enough to kill ourselves, but recently we have become powerful enough to commit global suicide. In the last century, mankind produced weapons beyond the imagination of the most romantic conquistador, and technologies that pollute and disrupt the natural order, but Humanism took centuries to accept other humans. In the US, the black man remained under apartheid until the 1970s, and though a black president is cause for optimism, black ghettos and Indian reservations are still the poorest places in the US.

It has been suggested that warfare is a disease of the developed nations, because pre-Columbian skeletons have fewer wounds resulting from violence than post-Columbian generations.³³ I suspect it is a matter of degree. The Lakota were fighting other tribes before they began fighting the white man, though it may be misleading to equate a cattle raid with warfare. Even chimpanzees engage in organised violence against other troops,³⁴ but it seems that the more esteemed the abstract function becomes, the more destructive the monkey. Rationality does not free us from our desires. It makes our appetites larger and our behaviour more ruthless. By modern standards, both conquistadors and pioneers were murderous megalomaniacs, but at least they did not wipe out species or create radioactive wastelands. From the perspective of the forgotten braves buried under the American prairies, where the *meum* of a modern cowboy might be a ranch bigger than England, our animal desires and the limitations of our flesh would have been entirely preferable.

Our philosophies, our technologies, our nuclear submarines and monuments might impress us, but to any right thinking dog, they are less interesting than a juicy bone. Dogs piss on our monuments without a second thought, and the Zen monk pisses in the temple hall.³⁵ To both the Buddha mind and the canine mind, it is just piss on a rock. Only the everyday human mind, half-awake between the two, is alarmed by the symbolism.

A healthy dog runs around his world of smell, sniffing and secreting, and a happy human lives in the abstract. Our minds produce the sweet flowers of the arts, the sharp thorns of etiquette, the soft grass of banter, and the choking vines of bureaucracy. Everything grows in this shitbag of a brain. If we must have philosophies, and we may be neurologically obliged to, we should at least keep them pruned, so they don't ruin the garden. After all, even the dumbest dog knows not to soil his own kennel.

Ω

The Reformation marked the beginning of the shift from a culture dominated by clerics to a culture of rationalism, with man at the centre. Humanism gradually loosened the priest's grip on our minds as it filtered into all areas of culture, philosophy, and science. Medicine is the science which reveals most about our beliefs, raising questions about our relationship with our bodies and the environment, and what the painful experiences in life mean to us. Whilst administering to our aching bones, physicians, pharmacists, psychiatrists and the rest have been engaged in a struggle for control over our bodies, and over our beliefs concerning them. Let us pinch our noses, my brothers and sisters, as we sift through another foul smelling lump of history, to find out exactly what our doctors have been feeding us.