

THE SEARCH FOR RECONCILIATION IN E. L. DOCTOROW'S *CITY OF GOD*

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It is no coincidence that E. L. Doctorow's novel *City of God* shares its title with St. Augustine's great philosophical work. Late in the novel the central character, Tom Pemberton (Pem), having resigned his Episcopalian priesthood, is leafing through an old copy of Augustine's text that he had enthusiastically underlined in his days as a young theology student. He remarks on the strong title with its admirable image, praising its "impassioned rhetoric" and its doctrinal assertiveness. His friend Everett responds by saying that he can't go along with the idea that unbaptised babies are condemned to hell (Doctorow, 2002, 251). This exchange reflects a central tension explored throughout the novel between, on the one hand, the attraction of the religious vision of redemption, peace and justice, as trumpeted in the closing pages of Augustine's text (Augustine, 2001, 1180-1181) and, on the other, the tendency to see all but the true believers as damnable, as reflected in the second part of Augustine's title, *Against the Pagans*. Although the novel works through this tension in terms of Pem's crisis of faith, it can also be read as a fictional exploration of the problem of how conflicting belief systems may be reconciled in order to open the way to a more respectful and harmonious social life.

It is particularly appropriate to focus on the theme of reconciliation in reading this novel because it has both theological and secular resonance, and the interplay between the two is clearly important for the author. The theological meaning of reconciling humanity with God is raised in the course of Pem's anguished self-questioning over his religious affiliation and commitment.¹ In secular terms the possibility that humanity can somehow overcome its stark divisions through processes of reconciliation is explored throughout the novel. 'Reconciliation' in this sense embraces a range of possible meanings, from a minimalist connotation of simple adjustment, as in being reconciled to one's fate, through to a stronger one of forging harmony out of discord. The interpenetration of the theological and secular meanings has been articulated by the Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann, for whom "selflessness and sacrifice in the 'service of reconciliation' of the world with

God are always also selflessness and sacrifice in the service devoted to the true humanity of people" (Moltmann, 1984, 32). In the novel it is clear that the reconciliation sought is a dynamic relation rather than a fixed end state, a process of becoming rather than a paradisiacal culmination. At one stage Pem expresses the wish that Isaiah had made it clearer that the messianic idea was not about an extraneous saviour but rather "a longing, a navigating principle, redemptive not on arrival but in never quite getting here" (Doctorow, 2002, 281).

City of God is Doctorow's first fictional attempt to deal directly with religious belief, and the complexity of the issues is reflected in the complexity of the novel itself. In contrast to best-sellers such as *Ragtime*, *The Book of Daniel* and *Billy Bathgate*, which were all turned into films, it has returned modest sales and received mixed reviews. Even John Leonard's glowing discussion of Doctorow's overall contribution to literature in *The New York Review of Books* refers to the "indifferent" reviews given to *City of God* (Leonard, 2004). A. O. Scott in *The New York Times* even went so far as to judge it a work of "profoundly uneasy conscience" and "bad faith", asking rhetorically "where is the novel?" (Scott, 2000). Certainly Doctorow has made no concessions to those seeking an easy read, but the accusation of bad faith is unsustainable. The novel reflects Doctorow's long-standing concern with the reconciliation of the humanist and sacred traditions. Even if this task is deemed impossible it cannot be denied that it is a pure expression of Doctorow's conscience. In a 1990 interview he expressed his concern at the coercive nature of fundamentalist religious thinking, arguing that it violated his sense of what religious thinking should be. "Religious thought", he argues, "to have any kind of integrity at all, must be the most private, tremblingly sacred kind of awareness we have" (Doctorow, 1999, 156). Furthermore he goes on to argue that the ambiguity created by radical doubting is part of the openness required by all writers, and that a writer who asserted that "this religion is the only religion" would be writing "worthless prose" (Doctorow, 1999, 157). More recently, in the 2003 William E. Massey lectures, he has spoken about the religious ambiguity in his own life, feeling an affinity with

the secular humanism of his father and grandfather but also with the religious reverence of his mother and grandmother, “in recognition that a spontaneously felt sense of the sacred engages the whole human being as the intellect alone cannot” (Doctorow, 2004, 67). Indeed the Massey lectures reiterate many of the religious themes covered in *City of God*, with Doctorow sometimes repeating the lines of the characters that he brought to life there.²

Two of these leading characters, Pem and Rabbi Sarah Blumenthal, want to preserve religiosity through an open and constructive reading of the sacred texts which emphasises the ethics of justice without succumbing to the impulse to denounce and proscribe. A third character, Everett, sympathises with their ethical perspective but does so as a secularist. What is being affirmed by all three characters is the need for an overt ethical awakening, in which faith in human potential and a profoundly caring attitude ought to prevail over doctrinal difference. In this outlook, ethics becomes the reconciling mediation between the secular and the religious. In what follows I will first summarise the novel’s fractured narrative and comment on its challenging complexity and its lack of resolution. Hopefully this will help to contextualize the discussion of reconciliation in the second section, which focuses on four ‘moments’ in which Doctorow explores particular dilemmas or dichotomies. The first contrasts a deep but opaque feeling for a sense of common humanity that contrasts with the instrumental rationality prevailing in the harsh competitiveness of metropolitan life; the second focuses on the story of the execution of a Jewish tailor in a Lithuanian ghetto during the Second World War; the third shows Pem’s disillusioned awareness of the political nature of the development of institutionalised religion as he attempts to justify his own theological position; the fourth focuses on Sarah’s discussion of the role of religious thought in contemporary world, and can be seen as a response to the questions raised by Pem. In the concluding section I argue that in attempting to bring such searching and spiritually challenging questions to his readers Doctorow has succeeded in encouraging them to reach out for reconciliation by accentuating an ethics of compassion. In this way those elements of religion which divide the people of the world are

subordinated to the ethics which are shared by all the major religions. Furthermore, a common ground is articulated between anti—authoritarian theism and a humanistic ethical persuasion.

A Complex Narrative

City of God was first published in 2000 and presents itself as both a *fin de siècle* and a millennial novel. It is a *fin de siècle* novel in the sense that it touches on many of the calamitous events of the preceding century such as two World Wars, the Holocaust, Vietnam, as well as some of the great ideas and developments in communication. Einstein and Wittgenstein are given discrete passages in which they bring their scientific and philosophical perspectives on the wondrous complexity and endless ambiguity of the world, implicitly inviting the idea that God is the unifying principle. It is also a millennial novel in which the nature and role of Christianity is considered, chiefly through Pem's crisis of faith. Not only are we taken through the final stages of his agonised break with the Church and his conversion to Judaism, but his story is being used as material for a novel by his secular friend, Everett, so we have a double reflexiveness which lends another dimension to the exploration of the profoundly difficult moral issues which flow through the text. The narrative is disjointed and dislocating, switching focus from character to character and containing numerous excursions. As well as the passages ascribed to Einstein and Wittgenstein there are also interpretative commentaries on popular songs of the 1920s and 30s performed by the 'Midrash Jazz Quartet', referring to the Jewish tradition of non-literal interpretation. These commentaries bring out the problems of identity and recognition faced by us all in everyday life, but although they are delivered with typical flashes of wit and levity they break up the flow and tone of the novel. In this way Doctorow jolts readers into relating the problems inherent in interpreting mundane experience to the 'higher' philosophical and theological issues raised by the main characters. As Julia Gracen points out in

a perceptive review, the novel encourages us to engage in midrash or interpretation as our task in trying to *make* sense of the world (Gracen, 2000).

The story which leads us in to these big issues is the mystery of the theft of a large bronze cross from Pem's parish church of St. Timothy's in New York. This sets him off as a 'Divinity Detective' in the mould of Father Brown and gives his friend Everett the idea of building a novel around it. The cross is found on the roof of a nearby 'alternative' synagogue, the Synagogue of Evolutionary Judaism, and brings him into contact with Rabbi Joshua Gruen and his wife, Rabbi Sarah Blumenthal. This meeting acts as a catalyst for Pem, who, in searching for the cross he has lost, finds another way of 'doing' religion which makes more sense to him. As for the cross, we never get to find out who stole it or why. The major ethical questions are raised through the story of Sarah's father, who had been a boy messenger in a Lithuanian ghetto during the Second World War and had helped to conceal a full account of ghetto life before it was destroyed and its people taken to the extermination camps. In trying to recover the ghetto diary from its hiding place in Lithuania, Rabbi Gruen is murdered. The task of recovery is then undertaken successfully by Pemberton who, in the process of this quest, discovers his love for Sarah. They decide to marry and he undertakes a conversion to Judaism, but precisely what they are going to with their lives is left open. Although this fragmented and irresolute narrative gives an appearance of contingency and relativism, beneath the surface there runs a strong sense of a search for unity through diversity.

Reconciliatory Moments

In what follows I will discuss four 'moments' in the search for reconciliation in the *City of God*. The first considers Pem's musings on the deep need for each other which he believes is embedded in us but is suppressed because of the pressures involved in navigating through the competitive strains of everyday

life. The first occurs near the beginning of the novel and sees Pem considering the ontology of city life as he walks the streets of his beloved New York. While acknowledging the alienation of city life he holds out hope for the modern city as a site for a cosmopolitan ideal. He contrasts the hopes of poor immigrants to the harsh reality of life in a city where the struggle for existence creates a racial fault line which “goes through our heart”, manifested in aggressive and suspicious “color-coded ethnic and social enclavists” (Doctorow, 2002, 12). However, as he sees thousands of people making their various ways in the teeming city streets he reflects on the spectacular nature of this maelstrom and intuits a hidden sense of togetherness:

“There is a specie recognition we will never acknowledge. A primatial over-soul. For all the wariness or indifference with which we negotiate our public spaces, we rely on the masses around us to delineate ourselves. The city may begin from a marketplace, a trading post, the confluence of waters, but it secretly depends on the human need to walk among strangers” (Doctorow, 2002, 12).

This contrast between the aggressive menace of the modern city and the ancient utopian vision of the city as a triumph of human rationality prompts the sort of metaphysical response we might expect from a priest. He speculates that despite the prevalence of narrowly self-interested responses to the exigencies of daily life there is, as part of what it is to be human, a deep-rooted “specie recognition” through which we register our commonality, a foundational sense of a common fate and complex inter-dependence. Soberly, he concludes we will never acknowledge it, but his faith commits him to believe that perhaps one day it may be acknowledged. Whether this is faith in God, faith in humanity, or faith in humanity as faith in God is all in the melting pot at this stage. The possibility of such a specie-recognition implies a disposition to reach out to ‘the other’ as a necessary part of self-affirmation, and this could be a basis for reconciliation between competing groups. This deep but largely submerged sense of affinity is more commonly experienced than we are led to expect by most social scientific accounts of social behavior,

as, for example, by individuals who suffer bereavement and share a common awareness that the love we hold for others is far more important than any material symbols of success. We also see it exhibited collectively when communities are drawn together in response to natural or man-made disasters, as experienced in New York after 9/11.

This speculation on our latent sociability is raised again in a similar way when Pem ponders the behaviour of people who escape from the grime of city life by enjoying themselves in the park. On the face of it this appears to be no more than an aggregate of decisions taken by hundreds of groups or individuals, yet the pleasure involved is in being part of a collective celebration. "How much of our desire to use the park depends on the desires of others to do the same?", wonders Pem, openly challenging the individualistic rational choice model which pervades western thought (Doctorow, 2002, 275). He avers that such public playfulness is more reflective, in the sense that we get a clearer picture of who we are because of the open space, compared with 'the comparative blindness of our personal selfhood' that we display when conducting our various instrumental tasks.

Another incident is included, again unrelated to the core narrative, in which isolation is overcome in the most difficult of circumstances. Following his resignation from the priesthood Pem decides to pay a final visit to the hospice where he had been visiting the terminally ill. In particular he wants to see an old newspaperman, McIlvaine, who is described as a "gentle" anti-cleric who had indulged Pem's attempts to go through his religious duties by commenting that his words were 'pretty' and that he wouldn't try to disillusion him by telling him it was all nonsense. A nun is in the ward with her guitar, presumably to play religious tunes, but the old man has persuaded her to play a medley of old standards such as 'Shine on Our Harvest Moon'. The joyful singing draws a new alertness from the dying patients who are normally sunk into themselves because of their hopeless situation. Pem joins in the singing in a highly emotional affirmation of life itself, experiencing a religious moment even though it had been instigated by a convinced atheist (Doctorow, 2002, 276-79).

The second moment of reconciliation takes on the seemingly impossible task of retrieving an awareness of our common humanity from the holocaust. In the novel there are extensive scenes from the ghetto which describe not only the brutality of the German authorities but the callousness of the Lithuanian citizens who laughed and jeered as the surviving Jews are herded from the ghetto to the death camps (Doctorow, 2002, 141). This horror seems to mock any notion of a common humanity, and at one stage the messenger's father despairs of the efforts of the Jewish Council to appease the Nazis by denouncing "this ritual pretense of common humanity to which we have to subscribe if we hope to outlast them" (Doctorow, 2002, 68). However, my reading of the ghetto passages suggests not a rejection of the notion of a common humanity but rather the idea that the actions of the Nazis transgressed that sense of "specie recognition" alluded to above. Indeed in order to suppress the voice of his conscience the Nazi must try to convince himself that the Jews are not 'true' humans at all.³ Defenceless, for the most part the Jews can only reconcile themselves to their fate, but the novel shows other forms of resistance. The first is though preserving the record of this evil so that future generations can know and learn from this terrible abasement. The second involves acts of defiance and resistance. Here malign destructiveness is met with action which affirms humanity even in the direst circumstances, and this is brought out in the story of the old tailor.

The account of life in a Lithuanian ghetto is taken from the memory of Sarah Blumenthal's father, who, as a ten-years-old whose parents have been taken away, is looked after by a grumpy old tailor, Srebnitsky. The tailor has been ordered to make a new uniform for a German officer, Major Schmitz, and the boy witnesses what happens when the officer collects his uniform. An ironic exchange takes place when Schmitz, exultant in his new uniform, is asked for payment and refuses, and both men are laughing at the idea that the Jew could be paid. Srebnitsky suddenly becomes serious, pretends to have spotted a loose thread and uses his scissors to slash the tunic, shouting "sew it yourself then., thief!" (Doctorow, 2002, 86). For this he is beaten to a

pulp, before being dragged onto a scaffold to be hanged. Before he dies he momentarily regains consciousness:

“He lifted his head and, of this I am sure, saw the scene before him clearly and, appreciating its magnitude, read his glory into it...I think now a mad triumphant light flashed from the tailor’s eyes before the stand was kicked from under him and his frail body swung from the neck” (Doctorow, 2002, 92-93)

The boy tries to understand how the old tailor somehow managed to exude dignity in his chosen act of self-destruction. He realises that the tailor could have stabbed the commandant, but if he had done so the Germans would have killed scores of Jews in reprisal. The tailor had calculated that he could sacrifice himself without endangering the ghetto, “a modulated act of defiance as deft and precise as his tailoring” (Doctorow, 2002, 93). He comments that the tailor did not simply desire to die but sought and found “self-transcendence” (Doctorow, 2002, 79).

Reflecting on his relationship with Mr. Srebnitsky now that *he* is an old man, Sarah’s father expresses an appreciation of simple duty, the understatement lends it power as a defence of basic human decency:

“But after all these years, what lingers in my mind of this cantankerous old man, this iconoclast, this embittered soul, is that he let out my clothes as I outgrew them and saw to it that I got a new pair of shoes when the old ones no longer fit” (Doctorow, 2002, 93).

Let us reflect on these passages. For the old tailor, existence is not worth clinging to if he is denied the respect involved in paying for a service rendered. His work is not something that he does simply to exist, it is a central part of what he is. His protest is not wild but calculated, and the punishment is not the undignified slaughter the Nazis mean it to be, but rather the end through which he retains his dignity. The old man’s remark that what he remembers most clearly about the tailor are the simple things he did to support his material existence reminds us of the basic acts of support through which we affirm our true humanity.

There are two other points which should be noted in this episode. First, although the callous anti-Semitism of some Lithuanian citizens is depicted, the diary of the ghetto is preserved because of the heroic efforts of a local Catholic priest, so that it is made plain that the response to evil is by no means predictable. Second, there is another end to this story within a story which is significant when we consider the theme of reconciliation. When Pem finally recovers the ghetto diary it contains conclusive proof of the identity of Schmitz, who had taken refuge in the United States and was fighting the accusation of his involvement in the ghetto (Doctorow, 2002, 230). This unlikely scenario meets our thirst for justice and reflects a need to believe that through the enactment of justice we can attack transgressions against humanity. Indeed Doctorow underlines this point by an otherwise unrelated story about a retired journalist in the US who acts as a one-man "avenging angel", tracking down first a former SS sergeant who had evaded extradition for war crimes, and then the former head of a Guatemalan death squad who is being protected by the US government. The journalist has little idea of how to exact revenge, and in highly comical and totally incongruous incidents, he kills them both by accident (Doctorow, 2002, 208-11; 219-223; 262-66). Such fantasies serve to placate our concern that justice is beyond reach, for to submit to the fatalism that 'they can get away with murder' is to give up on the possibility of moral progress. The humour signifies a space in which the bleakest reality is forced to submit to the warmth of a smile, and it can be a powerful contributor to reconciliation. There is also a theological implication here, recently articulated by Miroslav Volf, in the idea that a belief in divine vengeance is needed if we are to overcome the human urge to vengeance that is provoked by the evil of 'exclusion' (Volf, 1996, 28-32; 295-304).

Our third moment of reconciliation centers on Pem's struggle to reconcile his position as a priest with his doubts not just about the nature of the Church but about the nature of all institutionalised religion. He has been called to account for his 'off message' remarks and behaviour by the Bishop's Examiners. As he attempts to clarify his increasing unwillingness to stay within the Church's doctrines he notes the significance of the work of Elaine

Pagels on the early Christian Church. Describing the struggles between followers of the Gnostic and synoptic gospels, he comments that the gnostics were defeated because, believing that it would be wrong to have a centralised church, full time priests and bishops, they lacked the organizational means to overcome the institutionalist Christians:

“...it is also true that the struggle for Jesus was a struggle for power, that the idea of an actual resurrection, which the institutionalists put forth and the gnostics ridiculed, provided authority for church office, and that the struggle to define Jesus and canonize his words, or interpretations of his words by others, was pure politics.... It was a politically triumphant Jesus created from the conflicts of early Christianity, and it has been a political Jesus ever since, from the time of the emperor Constantine’s conversion in the fourth century through the long history of European Christianity, as we consider the history of the Catholic Church, its Crusades, its Inquisition, its contests and/or alliances with kings and emperor, and with the rise of the Reformation, the history of Christianity’s active participation, in all its forms, in the wars among states and the rule of populations. It is the story of power...” (Doctorow, 2002, 80-81).

Doctorow has already prepared us for this ‘political’ reading of Church history early in the novel when Pem’s friend Samantha reveals that she had been reading Pagels and concluded that the evolution of Christianity was ‘all politics’ and the doctrinal outcomes therefore quite arbitrary. (Doctorow, 2002, 15-16). This prompts Pem to harbour debilitating doubts about the nature of faith, and, in particular, about the Augustinian idea of predestination. However, merely to assert that certain doctrinal outcomes are explicable in terms of social and political struggle does not mean that Sam is justified in dismissing them as mere inventions, for each doctrinal position was carefully argued for and the outcomes might still have been truthful. Pem is evidently holding on to this possibility at his hearing by ending with a plea to the Bishops not to expel someone who they think has brought the 1960s along with him.

At this moment Pem still thinks he wants to be tolerated within the Church, but his skeptical stance on Church doctrine has clearly placed him beyond the pale. Rather than waiting to receive the push he decides to go of his own accord, and shortly afterwards, inspired by the open and searching discussions in the alternative synagogue, he elects to convert to Judaism. The hearing with the Bishop's Examiners acts a catharsis which he needs to go through in order to overcome his own stasis. In asserting the political nature of the development of Church doctrine and institutions and in citing the work of Pagels he reveals an awareness of the origins of the doctrinal divisions within Christianity which have had immense significance for the development of western consciousness. The Catholic Church and then the Reformation Churches reaffirmed the Augustinian image of humanity as tainted by original sin and totally dependent on the grace of God for salvation. As Erich Fromm argued in *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, in this view God's perfection seems to highlight our own powerlessness, whereas in the Christianity that was declared heretical, God is the symbol of what humanity can potentially become (Fromm, 1978, pp. 48-49). It is the 'humanistic trend' in religion, free from intolerance and hate, which Pem is expressing, and, as he indicates, this perspective was very popular in the 1960s. Early in the novel he points to one source for developing this position when he tells Everett that the major source of his spiritual inspiration had been the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich (Doctorow, 2002, 7). Later on, in speaking of his admiration for Sarah, he comments that she appears to live in two worlds, the mundane world of New York but also Tillich's country of ultimate concern (Doctorow, 2002, 111). This is the concept which Tillich uses to denote the striving for spiritual welfare, self-realisation and the meaning of life, "a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings" (Tillich, 1980, 47).

Pem's Christianity, it seems to me, can be best understood through Tillich's 1952 text, *The Courage To Be* (published in the year that Doctorow graduated in Philosophy from Kenyon College). Tillich rejects the simple 'acceptance' of religious faith as amounting to a surrender of the self, and calls instead for a faith in which simple theism is transcended through a

process of deep doubt and searching resulting in a commitment to the “God above the God of theism.” Tillich’s appeal for a reflexive and open “Church under the Cross” (Tillich, 1980: 188) is particularly appropriate to the story in *City of God* in which the cross of St. Tim’s is stolen and then found in the reform synagogue. Indeed it is tempting to see the relationship between Pem and his secular friend Everett as a parallel to the dialogue between the Christianity of Tillich and the non-theistic religiosity of Fromm which reached a wide audience in the 1950s and 1960s.⁴ Of course we might ask why *any* religious faith is required at all, and this is certainly taxing Pem throughout the book. As Richard Rorty says of Tillich’s theology, his sharp distinction between faith and belief is essential but it becomes difficult to retain a deliberate vagueness about those beliefs (Rorty, 1999, 155-158). Ultimately Pem affirms the need for some unifying principle and for spirituality in a world dominated by instrumental rationality, something which can serve as a call to the potential saving power of ethics. It certainly makes the line between believer and non-believer much finer and less important than in conventional considerations of the role of religion. What is less clear in the novel is why Pem should forsake Christianity for Judaism, for he appears to have no problem with the idea of Christ as an exemplar of wisdom and justice. When asked by Everett how much his conversion had to do with his relationship with Sarah he gives an evasive ‘everything and nothing’ reply and then tries to explain his position by arguing that Christianity had been erroneous in elevating Christ from the role of prophet:

“We will have a holy marriage, but this is all a continuation for me of my sadness that the followers of Jesus led us down the wrong path. A two-thousand-year detour. I don’t mean the beauty of the ethics, of the man. I mean the theology. I mean when they stepped him up in rank from prophet. Gave him familial ties” (Doctorow, 2002, 280-81).

The position which Pem arrives at appears closest to Messianic Judaism, whose 200,000-plus followers acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah but claim to remain firmly within the Jewish religion (Cohn-Sherbok, 2000). Alternatively, he could be veering towards Spinoza’s pantheistic conception of God, which,

as Santayana pointed out, combines Judaism with a veneration of Christ (Santayana, 1910, ix-xi). Having said that, it is clearly not the intention of the novel to argue in favour of any particular denomination but rather to emphasise the pre-eminence of ethics in religious thought and to warn about the dangers attached to fundamentalist positions. In a 1990 interview Doctorow made clear his antipathy towards 'the coercion of fundamentalist religious thinking' (Doctorow, 1999, 156), and in the Massey Lectures he reiterates his detestation of fundamentalism for its "absolutist intolerance" and its determination to compromise with nothing, "not even democracy". At the same time he praises religious people for their decency and good conduct, and also states the great attractiveness of religious worship for its inherent *promise* (Doctorow, 2004, 83-97).

Our fourth moment of reconciliation reiterates the religious direction which Pem is struggling to find, particularly the expression of the image of a non-authoritarian God through which humankind can strive to achieve dignity. This is Sarah Blumenthal's address to the Conference of American Studies in Religion (Doctorow, 2002, 288-91). Just prior to this speech Sarah is shown in debate at the reform Synagogue, affirming, like Pem, the centrality of the ethical core of religion and arguing that "God is not honored by a mechanical adherence to each and every regulation but by going to the heart of them all, the ethics, and observing those as if your life is at stake, as it may well be, I mean, your moral life, your life of consequence as a good, reflective, just, and compassionate human being" (Doctorow, 2002, 283). However, this contribution does not present an answer to questions of the role of ritual and tradition in religion, or, indeed, the justification for institutionalised religion at all. It is questions of this sort that she wrestles with in her Conference address (Doctorow, 2002, 288-291). She begins by favourably contrasting those who doubt to the "true believers" who display the impulse to excommunicate, satanize, eradicate and ethnically cleanse. Doubt, she contends, is a great civilizer, a condition of theological uncertainty which binds people to ethical behaviour. Controversially, she labels the aggression of the true believers as a religious impulse, and concludes that in the practice

and politics of religion “God has always been a licence to kill.” Only a skeptical and irresolute disposition towards God can bring us closer to walking in His spirit, she argues. In the Jewish tradition this walking – in Hebrew *Halakha* – is based not on knowledge about God, such as reciting texts from memory, but about imitation of God through our daily actions (see Fromm, 1966, 179-200).

Sarah goes on to ask whether it is possible to have the ethics that have developed with religious thought without the other aspects of religion. She asks if “after the exclusionary, the sacramental, the ritualistic, and simply fantastic elements of religion are abandoned, can a universalist ethics be maintained – *in its numinousness?*” [Doctorow’s emphasis]. Her response seems to be that it is hard to imagine that a universalist ethics can be maintained without some intuition of the divine:

“In this view the supreme authority is not God, who is sacramentalized, prayed to, pleaded with, portrayed, textualized, or given voice, choir, or temple walls, but God who is imperceptible, ineffable, except...for our evolved moral sense of ourselves” (Doctorow, 2002, 290).

This idea of the evolution of the idea of God is then linked by Sarah to the possibility of a progressive stage of socio-political evolution which began with the democratic revolutions 200 years ago. She speculates on the extension of ethical obligation so that we learn to practice a “daily indiscriminate and matter-of-fact reverence of human rights unself-conscious as a handshake.” The duty of the theologians is to emancipate themselves so that they can articulate the need for human rights as a new “quest for the sacred.” This formulation, as with a number of others in Sarah’s speech, is repeated by Doctorow as his own fervent hope in the Massey Lectures (Doctorow, 2004, 115-18). This appeal for an ethical renewal offers a perspective on liberation which focuses on the subjective experience of doubt and commitment, something which tends to be neglected in social-scientific attempts to theorise global justice and human rights (e.g. Pogge, 2002; Jones, 1999; Caney, 2005).

THE ULTIMATE CONCERN

In *City of God* Doctorow portrays the pain and anguish of reaching out for reconciliation as a spiritual journey from which there can be no turning back. We must go forward, as believers or non-believers, to secure a preponderant place for an ethics of compassion, for a reverence for human life. The ethics, of course, is the ethics of the Golden Rule – “whatever you want people to do to you, do also to them” (Matt. 7:12; Luke 6:31) – which is available, as Hans Küng has pointed out, with slight variations in all the main religions of the world (Küng, 1997, 98-99). Indeed in the novel Sarah quotes a Jewish version of it, the exhortation of Rabbi Hillel (at the time of the birth of Christianity) that “what is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour,” which Hillel claimed to be the essential truth of the whole Torah (Doctorow, 2002, 283). This principle of reciprocity is also central to humanistic ethics, and in the novel this ethics is presented as a mediation between the religious and the secular. In *City of God* Doctorow affirms the quest for a more ethical world, not through the assertion of dogmatic certitudes but rather the relentless interrogation of perceived truths from a range of perspectives. The combination of crisis of religious faith and search for social justice in this novel helps to open up the emotionally charged relationship between religion and politics to reconsideration, with a view to emphasising the ethical commitments which are shared across the faiths while questioning the importance assigned to dogma. By drawing us into the struggles for reconciliation in the life stories of his various characters Doctorow offers the subjective perspectives which are often neglected in my own field, social and political philosophy, when consideration is given to the question of how sharply differentiated cultures and belief systems can be reconciled. Of course there will be plenty of readers who will judge the path signposted by Pem and Sarah to be mistaken or disingenuous, but this is not the point. The energising strength of this novel is that it reminds us of the urgency of developing constructive dialogues between faiths and between theistic and

non-theistic ethics in a world in which religious divisions continue to tear us apart.

NOTES

¹ For a full discussion of the Christian doctrine of reconciliation see Barth (2004).

² The problem of expressing religious experience in non-theistic terms was noted by Erich Fromm in the 1960s and the issue was raised by a number of theologians mentioned in his book *You Shall Be As Gods* (Fromm, 1966, 56-58).

³ Grunberger reports that the Nazi regime devoted "vast resources" into "inculcating the notion that the Jews were devoid of human attributes" (Grunberger, 1977, 585). Goldhagen quotes General Bach-Zelewski at the Nuremberg Trials as stating that the regime had preached that the Slavs were an inferior race and "the Jews are not human beings at all" (Goldhagen, 1996, 373). Goldhagen quotes Walter Buch, a senior Nazi Party Judge, as stating in 1938: "The Jew is not a human being" (411 – see also 474).

⁴ On the role of religion in Fromm's social thought see Wilde, 2004, particularly pp. 45-50.