At Issue

Absolutely

The weatherman on one of the national morning TV shows has left his home base, and safety, in New York to be in Boston for the annual running of the marathon. Chatting with his distant anchored colleagues, he remarks amiably that the race will bring the runners close to the course of Paul Revere's run. Then: "I guess you could call Paul Revere the first marathoner." Well, yes, you could call Paul Revere an astronaut or the Messiah. You could say he beat Columbus to America and made the Louisiana Purchase (a dozen beignets to go) with a credit card. But should you?

We are told that Americans no longer know much history, and we shrug the warning off, despite the giddy public moments that put Paul Revere in Nikes. The past used to be, in novelist L. P. Hartley's memorable phrase, a foreign country, where they do things differently. It's withdrawing now to the distance of a separate galaxy. Increasingly, Americans do not recognize the persistence of the past—in the small history they make and the large events they observe. The past is never prelude; it's all coda. So events occur, ordinary and bizarre, with no adequate context for judging their significance. Behind the events of a day, however, there is the immense encroaching roominess of history. And we cheat ourselves when we fail to set the dimensions of our lives against that defining space and stretch our minds in its expanse.

"Lunacy" was a common judgment on the behavior of the 39 individuals who shared suicides in a San Diego mansion this past spring. But the judgment was etymologically flawed. The group who sought the key to heaven's gate aspired to a location way past the moon, and they were drawn not by the pull of the planets but by an old idea. They died in southern California, a place, we are told, where the soil does not take traditions. Yet their resolute "no" to this physical world echoes back through millennia. It has been whispered sometimes, and sometimes, as in San Diego, shouted. The belief that the world needs escaping, that the body is vile, in each of the word's several senses—wretched, wicked, of little worth—and that secret codes, open to the initiate, contain salvation recurs in the history of civilizations, pitched to varying degrees of intensity.

Allow the San Diego 39 a larger history and an ancestry. In the second century A.D., Gnostic separatists began to set themselves up in opposition to the Christian Church. Gnosticism picked its creed from a smorgasbord of beliefs—Christianity, Platonism, Judaism, Stoicism, Zoroastrianism, Mithraism—but the essence was a promise of salvation through access to secret knowledge. The movement's fundamental rejection of the material for the spiritual, its challenge to the goodness of creation and the freedom of man, its embrace of asceticism, and, most of all, its insistence on a higher doctrine, hidden from the many but revealed to the few, are recognizable still in a cul-de-sac in contemporary California.

The Gnostic spark burned on in third-century Manichaeism, a religion named for its Persian founder, Mani. Mani believed he was the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus, and his missionary's zeal sent him to India and China before his beliefs got him flayed alive in Persia in A.D. 276. In Manichaeism an uncompromising dualistic myth—rigidly differentiated principles of good and evil, God and nature, light and darkness—once again became the basis for a structure of belief and an ethic of asceticism. The forces of darkness were in cosmic struggle with the light; by invading the realm of

light, darkness mingled good and evil and trapped a divine substance in matter. Only the elect—those in the know—could disentangle their souls and participate in redemption.

Roman emperors proscribed Manichaeism as a subversive foreign cult, but it spread rapidly in the West. Was the absolutism of the religion its appeal? Augustine himself was a believer for a time, before he settled on Catholicism. (Despite his fierce polemical stance against Manichees and Gnostics, he never fully shed his unease with matter and flesh.) Manichaeism's formal life as a Christian heresy lasted many centuries, and its absolutist tenor was picked up by numerous post-Reformation sects, including the Puritans. Indeed, its deep suspicion of the world and the physical lingers still. Jump the centuries, blur the name, adjust the details, and you can see its vestiges even in savvy, loose, compliant America. Our Manichaeism may not know its name or have a catechism, but it is about the same feeling of election and the enduring human need for certainty in a burdensome, flawed, and improperly valued physical world.

The temptation to absolutism and to the reassurance of answers that exclude "however" may recur precisely when standards are relaxed and judgment is mostly reserved, as it is in America today. Asked to choose between a society that offers either a leap into the pudding of "whatever" or a hard landing against the stone of injunction, most Americans will leap in a second. But not all. Some will dislodge the stone and use it as a weapon. Absolutism is the border state adjacent to freedom. The border is open, the landscape ordered and inviting. It promises relief from the intricate responsibilities of democracy.

We imagine we have outgrown the humbling superstitions of the past and the compulsion to draw up sides for mortal stakes. Our tolerance is our talisman, and "We Can Work It Out" an anthem for the age. The mind holds no more recesses than a balloon. To all our troubles there is a simple arc, and we are urged to trace it smartly, so that we can "let the healing process begin" and, yes, "reach closure." (If only Closure were a town in the Yukon, to which everyone who used the word—the critic, the broker, the hooker—could be banished.) The Valley girl's impatience is our rough wisdom: "Get over it, Lear!"

So where is our Manichaeism? Is it in anxiety over some cosmic upheaval coinciding with the arbitrary assignment of a millennium? Well, we are promised chaos when the clock strikes zero, but it will be a clean apocalypse, done with a click and a whir—no astral confusion or riven earth, no Messiah come in glory to part sheep from goats. Our computers will simply refuse to recognize the millennial turn and retreat in their obdurate mechanical course to 100 years ago, thereby giving us the chance for another go at the 20th century, the rehearsal having been a shambles. The consequence of the machines' refusal will be a confusion as absolute as any in a roiling, traditional hell. The servant systems by which we keep track of ourselves will lose their bearings, and take all our bearings with them.

Neither superstition nor millennial fervor defines our Manichaeism. Its expressions are social and civic and revealed in our successive absolutisms—in yesterday's attempt to impose Prohibition on the country; in today's division between those who insist abortion is murder and those who say it's a procedure; in the wounding invocation of racial identity as a form of election. The current divisions of our politicians do not warrant mention because they are comic, not cosmic—the antagonists reel from pulled punches—but our wars of religion do. These are different from the bloody engagements of previous centuries. We do not send armies of hostile believers out onto a battlefield. Rather, the very notion of religious belief contends with the insistence that religion can have no place in the public discourse of a civil society, that its specific values have nothing to add.

Our absolutisms attach themselves to the serious and the trivial, and sometimes conflate the two. Who has not witnessed the over-the-top indignation of individuals who smell tobacco smoke in a smoke-free zone and react as if they had inhaled nuclear waste? The fury of these Savona-

rolas of second-hand risk can be absolute. Of course, the outrage is in the service of saving the nation's children, about whom Americans can be hopelessly—and opportunistically—sentimental when they want to compel attention. The true protectors of the young are those who also advise them that our culture of accumulation will ravage their spirits as dependably as nicotine reduces their bodies.

And there's a Manichaean divide to our contemporary ambivalence about the body. Some treat it as a pincushion; "scarification" is a service available by appointment, like having your tires rotated. Slick pages show the concaved bodies of the young, looking heroin-hollowed and so diminished they should be attached to hospital tubing and infused for days with glucose. The willed contempt of these transparent young things for their mortal selves, however absolute it may appear, does not match the scorn we should reserve for those who profit by their display.

Another portion of the society fusses with the body as if it were upscale Play-Doh. Their compulsion to remake the body and find the escape hatch from its time-bombed mortality—to suck it thin and polymer it perfect, to fall and fall again on the laser's edge—seems finally just another form of contempt. But, then, the irksomeness of the flesh has confounded even mighty religions. Catholicism, for one, blows hot and cold on the body (and chilly more often than not), though, in fact, its beliefs are centrally informed by an incarnational strain: God's son took a body and raised it from the dead to signal the worth of the physical; the world will end with universal resurrection and the harmony of flesh and spirit. The trick is to assign to each its just value until then and keep the two in line, despite a sense that they are sometimes as mismatched as tiger and prey.

The old Greeks knew the dangers of excess, and one of the purposes of tragedy was to display the risk—and the thrill. But ordinary life, outside the theater, was to be lived back from the edges, on a middle way that is rarely the most scenic route through this compromised world. There will always be those who opt for the extremes, and they can be heroes, or martyrs, or fools. The self-absorption of any elect—secular, religious, cultural—will not serve the communal needs of the society, and that is perhaps the fundamental criticism to be made of it. The cowardice of rejecting the world does not match the achieved heroism of reasoned accommodation. Behind the comet that ran interference between the irrevocable act of 39 souls in California and their salvation was a deeper gulf than they ever expected to cross. They are not the first to have been blinded by a light, and perhaps history lends their sorry deaths a little grace. The higher course is still to linger right here, in the flesh, in the pudding, in the stew.

—James M. Morris