

Did the Devil make Protestants throw Catholics
out of windows—or was it biology?

The Diet of Worms and the Defenestration of Prague

By Stephen Jay Gould

I once ate an ant (chocolate covered) on a dare. I have no awful memories of the experience, but I harbor no burning desire for a repeat performance. I therefore feel poor Martin Luther's pain when, at the crux of his career, in April 1521, he spent ten days on the Diet of Worms (washed down with a good deal of wine, or so I read).

I am, I suppose, a collector by nature, and mental drawers have more room for phrases and facts than physical cabinets maintain for specimens. I therefore reserve one cranial shelf for the best funny or euphonious phrases of history.

The *Diet of Worms* is my prize specimen, but I award second place to another D-phrase of European history—the *Defenestration of Prague* in 1618, the “official” trigger of the Thirty Years' War—one of the most extended, horrendous, and senseless conflicts in Western culture.

I do not believe in vicarious experience and will go to great, even absurd, lengths to stand on the true spot or place a hand on the very wall. I could have written *Wonderful Life* without a visit to the Burgess Shale, but what a sacrilege! Walcott's fossil quarry is holy ground and not all that difficult of access. I therefore accepted a recent invitation to lecture in Heidelberg on the

stipulation that my hosts drive me to nearby Worms, site of the Diet. (I had, three years earlier, stood on the square in Prague where several bodies had landed after ejection from an upper-story window.)

Now, with pilgrimages completed to the sources of the two phrases that most caught my fancy in Mrs. Ponti's fifth-grade European history class, I can muse more formally upon the sadly common theme behind the two D's—our cursed tribal tendency to factionalize, fight, and then, so often in our righteous certainty, to define our opponents as vermin and try to expunge either their doctrines (by censorship and fire) or their very being (by genocide). The Diet of Worms and the Defenestration of Prague mark two cardinal events in the sad chronology of hatred and bloodshed surrounding a central theme of Western history, one filled with aspects of grandeur as well—the schism of “universal” Christianity into Catholic and Protestant portions.

The Diet, or governing body, of the Holy Roman Empire met at the great medieval Rhineland city of Worms in 1521, partly to demand a recantation from Martin Luther. (German sources call the Diet a *Reichstag*. Moreover, the German term for fish bait is spelled with a “u,” not an “o” as it is in English. Thus, the *Reichstag zu Worms* packs no

culinary punch in the original.)

In school, I learned the heroic version of Luther's appearance before the Diet of Worms. This account (which I have just confirmed by reading a bunch of recent biographies) reports factual material in an accurate manner—and is therefore “true” in one crucial sense, yet so very partial and therefore misleadingly incomplete in other equally important ways. Luther, excommunicated by Pope Leo X in January 1521, arrived in Worms under an imperial guarantee of safe conduct to justify or recant his apostasies before the militantly Catholic and newly elected Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, heir to the Hapsburg dynasty of central Europe and Spain, and twenty-one-year-old grandson of Ferdinand and Isabella, monarchs of Spain and patrons of Christopher Columbus.

Luther, with substantial support from local people of all classes, including his most powerful protector, Frederick the Wise, elector of Saxony, appeared before Charles and the Imperial Diet on April 17. Asked if he would retract the contents of his books, Luther begged some time for consideration (and, no

The Defenestration of Prague, 1618

doubt, for preparation of a rip-roaring speech). The emperor granted a day's recess, and Luther returned on April 18 to make his most famous statement.

Speaking first in German and then in Latin, Luther argued that he could not disavow his work unless he could be proved wrong either by the Scriptures or by logic. He may or may not have ended his speech (reports vary) with one of the most famous statements in Western history: *Hier stehe ich; ich kann nicht anders; Gott helfe mir; Amen*—"Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise; God help me; Amen."

Faced with Luther's intransigence, the emperor and a rump session of the Diet issued the *Edict of Worms* on May 8. But this document, banning Luther's work and enjoining his detention, could not be enforced, given the strength of Luther's local support. Instead, under Frederick's protection, Luther "escaped" to the castle of Wartburg, where he translated the New Testament into German.

A stirring story, invoking some of the finest themes in Western liberal and intellectual traditions: freedom of thought, personal bravery against authority, the power of one man with a grand idea before the crumbling weight of centuries. But dig just a little deeper, below the overt level of hagiography and school-day moralisms, and you enter the quagmire of intolerance and mayhem on all sides. Scratch the surface of soaring notions such as "justification by faith" and you encounter a world where any major idea becomes a political instrument in a quest for social order or a tool in the struggle for power between distant popes and local princes. Consider the operative paragraph of the *Edict of Worms*, complete with a closing metaphor about diets in the modern culinary sense:

We want all of Luther's books to be universally prohibited and forbidden, and we also want them to be burned. . . . We follow the very praiseworthy ordinance

and custom of the good Christians of old who had the books of heretics like the Arians, Priscillians, Nestorians, Eutychians, and others burned and annihilated, even everything that was contained in these books, whether good or bad. This is well done, since if we are not allowed to eat meat containing just one drop of poi-

1209. Pope Innocent III urged a crusade against them—just one among so many examples of Christians annihilating other Christians—and the resulting war effectively destroyed the Provençal civilization of southern France. The Inquisition mopped up during the next several decades, thus completing the



Martin Luther addressing the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms, 1521

son because of the danger of bodily infection, then we surely should leave out every doctrine (even if it is good) which has in it the poison of heresy and error, which infects and corrupts and destroys under the cover of charity everything that is good.

These words are chilling enough when confined to the destruction of documents. But annihilation often extended to the inventors of unorthodoxies and to the genocide of followers. Of the early heretics mentioned in the *Edict* above, Priscillian, bishop of Avila in Spain, was convicted of sorcery and immorality and executed by the Roman emperor Maximus in 385. The later Albigensians fared far worse. These ascetic communitarians of southern France frightened papal and other authorities with their views on the corruption of clergy and secular rulers. In

extirpation of an unpopular view by genocide. Grisly, but effective. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* simply states: "It is exceedingly difficult to form any very precise idea of the Albigensian doctrines because present knowledge of them is derived from their opponents."

If Luther and other reformers had promoted their new versions of Christianity in the name of love, tolerance, and respect, then I might accept the heroic version of history as progress inspired by rare individuals of broader vision. But Luther could be just as dogmatic, just as unforgiving, and just as bloodthirsty as his opponents—and when his folks took the reins of power, the old tactics of banning, book burning, and doctrinal murder continued. For example, Luther had originally held little animus toward Jews, for he hoped that, by eliminating papal abuses, his reforms might lead to their conver-

sion. But when his hopes withered, Luther turned on the vitriol and, in a 1543 pamphlet titled *On the Jews and Their Lies*, recommended either forced deportation of Jews to Palestine or the burning of all synagogues and Jewish books (including the Bible) and the restriction of Jews to agrarian pursuits.

In his most horrific recommendation (and on the eve of supposed personal happiness in his marriage to Katherine von Bora), Luther advocated the wholesale slaughter of German peasants, whose rebellion had recently been brutally suppressed. To be sure, Luther had his reasons and frustrations. He had never supported uprisings or rebellion against secular authority, although some of the more moderate peasant groups had used his teachings as justifications. Moreover, the militant faction of peasants had been led by his bitter theological enemy Thomas Müntzer. Political conservatives like Luther always take a dim view (if only to save their own skins) of insurrections by large and poorly disciplined groups of disenfranchised people. But Luther's recommendation for virtual genocide, as presented in his 1525 tract, *Against the Murderous and Thieving Hordes of Peasants*, makes my skin crawl, especially as a recommendation (however secular) from a supposed man of God:

If the peasant is in open rebellion, then he is outside the law of God. . . . Rebellion brings with it a land full of murders and bloodshed, makes widows and orphans, and turns everything upside down like a great disaster. Therefore, let everyone who can, smite, slay, and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel. It is just as when one must kill a mad dog; if you don't strike him, he will strike you, and the whole land with you [emphasis mine].

The victorious nobility followed Luther's recommendations, and esti-

mates of the death toll (mostly inflicted upon rebels who had already surrendered and therefore posed no immediate threat) run as high as 100,000.

Sad tales of mass murder perpetuated by differing factions of a supposedly united cause haunt human history. I don't think that Christians are worse than other folks in this regard; we just know these stories better as defining incidents of a culture shared by most readers of this magazine. I am not speaking of isolated executions, but of wholesale slaughters, however unknown to us today for two eerie rea-

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sons. First, Hitlers of the past didn't have the technology (although they probably had the will) to kill six million in a few years, so their depredations, although thorough, were more local. Second, obliterated cultures of bygone times featured fewer people, living in limited areas, and publishing little or no documentation. An older style of genocide could therefore be devastatingly complete and effective, truly wiping out all memory of a vibrant people.

I have already mentioned the Albigensian crusade. In 1204, the Fourth Crusade, having failed to reach Palestine through Egypt to conquer the Holy Land, sacked the Byzantine Christian capital of Constantinople instead, imposing more mayhem upon people and art than the "infidel" Ottomans exacted when the city finally fell from Christian rule in 1453. The rupture of Europe into Protestant and Catholic parts provided even more opportunity for such divisive destruction—and Martin Luther's legacy surely includes as much darkness as light. Which brings me to the Thirty Years

War and the Defenestration of Prague.

Throwing people out of windows has a long legacy in this beautiful city—a true “Scandal in Bohemia,” so to speak. In each major incident but the last, rebelling Protestants (or proto-Protestants) tossed entrenched Catholics out of their strongholds. The “official” Defenestration (with a capital D) occurred in 1618. Local Protestants, justifiably enraged when the very Catholic King Ferdinand II reneged on promises of religious freedom, stormed Hradcany Castle and threw three Catholic councilors out of the window

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and into the moat. (Legend states that they walked away, embarrassed but unharmed, thanks either to their good fortune or to the intended aim of their adversaries—for they landed in a large and soft dunghill.)

The rebels of 1618 had consciously reenacted a past incident that they wished to claim as part of a proud and continuous history. (A Latin window, by the way, is a *fenestra*—so *defenestration* is just a fancy word for throwing something out of such an opening.) The memory of Bohemian religious reformer Jan Hus, burned for heresy in 1415 and claimed by later Protestants as a precursor, inspired the initial defenestration of Prague in 1419. A Hussite army (if you like them) or a rabble (if you don't) stormed the New Town Hall and threw three Catholic consuls and seven citizens out of the window (some to their death, for no cushioning dunghill broke these falls), and Bohemia did pass to Hussite rule for a time. Yet another, but lesser-known, defenestration occurred in 1483. King Vladislav had restored Catholic domin-

ion, so another dissident band of Husites threw the Catholic mayor out of the window.

The tragic epilogue to this sequence will be remembered by readers of a generation just before mine. Jan Masaryk, son of Tomáš Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia, held on as the only non-Communist minister of the postwar puppet government. On March 10, 1948, his body was found in the courtyard of Czernin Palace. He had fallen from a window forty-five feet above. Had he jumped as a suicide (with ironic consciousness of

1648. Today, the ruined castle of Heidelberg, beautifully lit at night, turns the entire city into a romantic stage set for *The Student Prince*. But Heidelberg retains no medieval buildings, and the castle lies in ruins, as the consequence of yet another disastrous, internecine war among Christians—when the Protestant elector of the Rhineland Palatinate (with Heidelberg as a center) died without an heir, and Catholic France claimed the territory because the elector's sister had married Philip of Orléans, brother of Louis XIV.

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his nation's history) or had he been pushed in a murder? The case has never been solved.

The Protestant triumph after the official defenestration, lasted only two years and ended in yet another splurge of murder and destruction. With powerful Hapsburg support, Catholics regrouped and decisively defeated the Protestants in the Battle of the White Mountain on November 8, 1620. Weeks of plunder and pillage followed in Prague. A few months later, twenty-seven nobles and other citizens were tortured and executed in the Old Town Square. The victors hung twelve heads, impaled on iron hooks, from the Bridge Tower as a warning.

The resulting Thirty Years' War cannot be reduced to a dichotomous struggle between Catholics and Protestants—but this essential division did define much of the temper and zealotry of the controversy (for we seem able to kill "apostates" far more easily than merely errant compatriots). Much of central Europe lay in ruins, as the mercenary armies of various potentates ravaged the countryside, burning, raping, and pillaging as they went. Nor did the battles of Protestants against Catholics end with the Treaty of Westphalia in

principle that when things look bad, they can get far worse. If Christians could slaughter one another with such gusto and ferocity, what could true outsiders expect—for non-Christians could be defined even more easily as beyond human worth and therefore ripe for elimination. For this final chapter in man's inhumanity, we turn to the obvious test: the fate of Jewish communities in medieval and Renaissance Europe at the time of diets and defenestrations.

Jewish communities persisted for a thousand years in the Rhineland. Every city that I visited—Worms, Speyer, Rothenburg—maintains memorials to the persecution and elimination of these communities, while tourist outlets sell informative pamphlets on their history, lest we forget. One almost feels a concerted attempt to expiate what cannot be undone—a tale of prolonged intolerance so recently capped by the brutal and entirely effective last curtain (at least locally) of the "final solution."

Gershom ben Judah, known as the "light of the exile," headed the rabbinic academy of Mainz at the end of the tenth century, before the first millennium of our era had passed. His most celebrated disciple, the great Talmudist Rashi, studied in Worms about 1060.

Rashi's most noted follower, Meir Ben Baruch (known to pious Jews by his acronym as the Maharam), headed the Jewish community in Rothenburg, now a perfectly preserved, entirely walled, and touristically flooded medieval town. In 1286, Emperor Rudolph I abrogated the political freedom of Jews and imposed special taxes to make these despised people *servi camerae* (serfs of the treasury). Rabbi Meir tried to lead a group of Jews to Palestine, but he was arrested and confined in an Alsatian fortress. His people raised an enormous ransom, but Meir refused to be freed (and died in prison) because he knew that a purchased liberation would only encourage the emperor to capture other rabbis for revenue. Fourteen years later, a Jewish merchant in Worms ransomed the great rabbi's body. His tomb, and that of the merchant, occupy adjacent places in the Jewish cemetery of Worms. Following an ancient custom, Jewish visitors and residents (mostly Russian emigrés) still write their prayers and requests on scraps of paper and place them, weighted down by small stones, atop the Maharam's tomb.

After Meir's exile, the Jews of Rothenburg were expelled to a ghetto beyond the city walls, and then, in 1520, banished entirely and forevermore. Only the dance hall remains (because it became a poorhouse for Christians) with a few tombstones in Hebrew, mounted on the garden wall.

The larger Jewish community of Luther's Worms survived longer, but just as precariously. In 1096, soldiers of the First Crusade passed through Worms and ravaged the Jewish quarter. In 1349, nearly all the Jews of Worms were murdered on the false accusation that they had brought on the plague by poisoning the wells. In 1938, on the infamous *Kristallnacht*, the Jewish synagogue burned to the ground. More than a thousand Jews of Worms perished in the Holocaust. The recon-

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structed synagogue now serves as a Jewish museum and memorial, but not as a place of worship, for no active Jewish community exists in Worms.

Two plaques on the synagogue wall tell a tale of hope and despair. The first, mounted shortly after the end of World War II, contains the names of Jewish citizens presumed dead in the Holocaust. Happily, some of these people had survived (in refugee camps, unknown to makers of the plaque). Their raised bronze names have been filed off, leaving blank spaces of victory. But further records of the Holocaust then documented more deaths, and these names adorn the second plaque—greatly exceeding in number the names happily erased from the first memorial.

Ironically, only the Jewish cemetery survived intact, thanks to a ruse (according to local tradition) of the town archivist, a sincere Christian with great respect for Jewish traditions. Himmler had expressed a passing interest in the cemetery during a prewar visit. When local Nazis later ordered the destruction of the cemetery (located on the other side of town, beyond the walls), the archivist exaggerated Himmler's casual comment into an explicit order for preservation. Cautious local authorities never checked with Berlin—and a place of death remains as the only unscathed survivor of a millennium's existence for one of Europe's most illustrious Jewish communities.

If you have been wondering why I recount these tales from the dark side of human history in a column on evolutionary biology, I do wish to segue toward an ending on both a positive and a Darwinian note. Humans are capable of such glory—and such horror: the pogroms of Worms and Luther's stirring speech at the Diet of Worms; the numerous defenestrations of Prague and the magnificent baroque architecture of Prague. We bask in the glory with simple pleasure; but we contemplate the horror with anguish and puzzlement—

and with a burning urge to explain how creatures capable of such decency can promote such iniquity of their own free will (and with apparent moral calm and intensity of supposed purpose).

But do we perpetrate the darkness "of our own free will?" Perhaps the most popular of all explanations for our genocidal capacity cites evolutionary biology as an unfortunate source—and as an ultimate escape from full moral responsibility. Perhaps we evolved these capacities as active adaptations now gone awry in the modern world. Current genocide may be a sad legacy of

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behaviors that originated for Darwinian benefit during our ancestral construction as small bands of hunters and gatherers on the savannas of Africa. Darwin's mechanism, after all, encourages only the reproductive success of individuals, not the moral dream of human fellowship across an entire species. Perhaps the traits that lead to modern genocide—xenophobia, tribalism, anathematization of outsiders as subhuman and therefore subject to annihilation—rose to prominence during our early evolution because they enhanced survival in tiny, nontechnological societies based on kinship and living in a world of limited resources under a law of kill-or-be-killed.

A group devoid of xenophobia and unschooled in murder might invariably succumb to others replete with genes to encode a propensity for such categorization and destruction. Chimpanzees, our closest relatives, will band together and systematically kill members of adjacent groups. Perhaps we are programmed to act in such a manner as well. These grisly propensities once promoted the survival of groups armed with nothing more destructive than teeth and stones. In a world of nuclear

bombs, these unchanged (and perhaps unchangeable) inheritances may now spell our undoing (or at least propagate our tragedies)—but we cannot be blamed for mere moral failings. Our accursed genes have made us creatures of the night.

This superficially attractive balm to our collective conscience is nothing but a cop-out based on deep fallacies of reasoning. (Perhaps the tendency to think by such fallacies represents our real evolutionary legacy—but this is another speculation for another time.) I am happy to acknowledge that we have a

biologically based capacity to categorize humans as insiders or outsiders, and then to view outsiders as beyond fellowship and ripe for slaughter. But where can such an argument lead in terms of modern moral discourse or even social observation? For this claim is entirely empty and devoid of explanatory power. We gain nothing by speculating that a capacity for genocide lies within our evolutionary heritage. We already know that we have such a capacity because history provides so many examples of actualization.

An evolutionary speculation can only help if it teaches us something we don't know already—if, for example, we learned that genocide was biologically enjoined by certain genes, or even that a positive propensity, rather than a mere capacity, regulated our murderous potentiality. But the observational facts of human history speak against determination and only for potentiality. Each case of genocide can be matched with numerous incidents of social benevolence: each murderous band can be paired with a pacific clan. Genocide gains greater prominence only for superior "news value" and for devastating effectiveness (as the pacific clan merely dis-

appears and murderers control the resulting media). But if both darkness and light lie within our capacities, and if both tendencies operate at high frequency in human history, then we learn nothing by speculating that either or probably both lie within our evolutionary, adaptive Darwinian heritage. At the very most, biology might help us to delimit the environmental circumstances that tend to elicit one behavior rather than the other.

To cite the example most under current discussion in the "pop science" press, numerous books and articles

dominate politics, have affairs, and abandon families with young children—and why women act coy, love to nurture children, and preferentially enter the caring professions.

Perhaps I have caricatured this position, but I don't think so, having read so many articles of support. In fact, I don't even think that the basic argument is wrong. Such differences in behavioral strategy do make Darwinian sense in the light of structural disparity between male and female reproduction. But the attributions could not be more deeply erroneous for the same reasons noted

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(with Robert Wright's *The Moral Animal* as the most noted and most absurd example) preach that a new science of evolutionary psychology has discovered the biological basis of behavioral differences between sexes. Women produce only a few large eggs and must spend years of their lives growing embryos within their bodies and then nurturing the resulting babies. Men, on the other hand, produce millions of tiny sperm each time and need invest nothing more in a potential offspring than the effort of an ejaculation. Therefore, the argument continues, in the great Darwinian quest for passing more genes to future generations, women should act in such a way as to encourage male investment after impregnation (protection, feeding, economic wealth, and subsequent child care), whereas men would rather wander right off in search of other mates in a never-ending quest for maximal genetic spread.

From this basic dichotomy of evolutionary purpose, all else in the lexicon of pop psychology follows. We now know why men rape, lust for power,

above in discussing the fallacy of biological explanations for genocide. Men are not programmed by genes to maximize matings, nor are women devoted to monogamy by unalterable nature. We can only speak of capacities, not requirements or even determining propensities. Therefore, our biology does not make us do it. Moreover, what we share in common genetics can easily overwhelm what men and women might tend to do differently. Any man who has fiercely loved his little child—including most fathers, I trust—knows that no siren song from distinctive genes or hormones can overcome this drive for nurturing behavior shared with the child's mother.

Finally, when we note the crucial differences in fundamental pattern and causation between biological evolution and cultural change, and when we recognize that everything distinctive about the cultural style enjoins flexibility rather than determination, we can understand even more generally why a cultural phenomenon like genocide (despite any underlying biological ca-

capacity for such action) cannot be explained in evolutionary terms. As the fundamental difference in pattern, biological evolution builds a topological tree—a process of separation and divergence. Once a species arises as an independent lineage, it acquires genetic distinction from all other lineages forever, and must evolve on its own path. Cultural change, on the other hand, is virtually defined by possibilities of amalgamation among different traditions—as Marco Polo brings pasta from China and I speak English as a “native” tongue. Our distinctive flexibilities arise from this constant interweaving.

As the fundamental difference in causation, biological evolution is Mendelian. Organisms can only pass their genes, not the heritage of their efforts, as physical contributions to future generations. But cultural change is Lamarckian, as we transmit the fruits of our acquired wisdom and inventiveness directly to future generations in the form of books, tools, and buildings. Again, this Lamarckian style grants to cultural change a speed, a lability, and a flexibility that Darwinian evolution cannot muster.

In 1525, thousands of German peasants were slaughtered (with Luther's approbation), and Michelangelo worked on the Medici Chapel. In 1618, the upper windows of Prague disgorged some men, and Rubens painted some mighty canvases. The Cathedral of Canterbury is both the site of Becket's murder and the finest Gothic building in England. Both sides of this dichotomy represent our common, evolved humanity. Which, ultimately, shall we choose? As to the potential path of genocide and destruction, let us take this stand. It need not be. We can do otherwise.

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