

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

I was born into and grew up in a very conservative Irish Catholic family, the son of two immigrants. I was deeply involved in the religious and political ideologies that were taught in my home. I didn't really have any choice. I was compelled to accept the beliefs espoused by my parents, my clergy, and the community in which I lived. I was indoctrinated at a young age and I didn't dare question the ideas presented. Their power over me as an individual was simply overwhelming.

I embraced their beliefs completely, more because of the fear of adult disapproval and the terror of living in excruciating torment in hell for all eternity, than because of their inherent appeal. I realize now, looking back, that I was, for all intents and purposes, a slave to these ideas, oblivious to their true meaning and purpose, and ignorant of their consequences and fallibility. I allowed authority figures of all types to manipulate me and pacify me with their ideologies.

The problem was that my desire for the benefits offered by adherence to their belief systems was strong. The ideologies promised me that my existential anxiety about life and death matters would be substantially reduced, that I would be protected from uncertainty and doubt, and that my status and identity would be raised to new heights. This all anesthetized me to the need to think for myself, to take responsibility for my beliefs, and to accept the challenge of building my own belief structure from the bottom up, rather than embracing ideologies imposed from the top down.

The big issue was that, given my deep emotional and psychological attachment to ideologies, how was I ever going to break free from the bonds of these ideas? The answer was

that I wasn't—not without some push from outside of my comfort zone. I needed a trigger, an external event that motivated me to challenge my existing beliefs, to consider alternatives, and to be willing to accept new ideas. Fortunately, over time, my thinking was impacted by two chance events that opened my eyes to the truth about ideologies.

The first trigger was an experience that I had in the confessional at my local Catholic Church when I was a teenager. I went to confess about what would seem to have been a relatively minor infraction. However, the Church deemed it a serious breach of their laws, i.e., eating meat on a Friday. In this specific case, I was served roast beef at a formal dinner, on a Friday night, for young people from the local high schools. Since the meat was the only food option that was made available and the food was being served by a waiter, I made the choice to eat the beef to avoid making a big issue at the dinner table with a dozen other people present. I rationalized it by promising myself that I would eat no meat for the next two days, a commitment which I kept.

But the next day, feeling badly about my decision, I went to church and confessed my sin to the local priest. His response was to tell me that I had committed a mortal sin, and that if I had died in a car accident after the dinner, I would have gone straight to hell. Because I knew my catechism, was so invested in my beliefs, and was so deeply in the sway of the important adults in my life, I accepted the Priest's judgment and moved on. But, I never forgot the experience.

Under normal circumstances, that would have been the end of the matter. But, as fate would have it, several years later, when I was driving to visit a friend at a nearby college, I heard on the radio that the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy in Rome had decided that Catholics would no longer go to hell for eating meat on Friday. The effect this news had on me was stunning. My immediate reaction was: What happened to all the Catholics who had spent

centuries suffering eternal torment in hell for eating meat on Friday? I felt that, at a minimum, they had experienced a tremendous injustice at the hands of God or his Church; or at the maximum, they had experienced excruciating eternal torment that was completely unnecessary. Either way, it seemed as if the Church was deliberately using fear and terror tactics to compel unquestioning obedience to Church laws, no matter how unimportant.

The second thought I had was that, if the consequences of violating one of the Church's laws--one that had been in place for over eleven hundred years--could be reversed so easily, how could any church law have any validity at all? For me, the answer was that Church laws were just that, Church laws. They were not God's laws, because God would not make the mistake of punishing people unjustly. Instead, I was inclined to conclude that Church laws were merely constructs of men and therefore very fallible. I did not have to obey Church law, just God's law.

For the first time in my life, I had a reason to challenge the fundamental validity of my childhood religious beliefs. I began thinking differently about the Catholic Church. I was no longer so in awe of the Church. I started to spend a good deal of my spare time studying all the major religions and reading their sacred texts to learn more about their fundamental tenets and doctrines. I wanted to see if any of them offered me a better alternative. Unfortunately, none really did. There was, in my view, a surprising sameness to all of them.

For a while, that was as far as my search went. I kept on going to a Christian church; I continued to accept the same broad principles that I had always held; and I brought my children up to believe the same things. I just could not let go of my religious beliefs. They were like an addiction, holding the same power over me as a narcotic would, in spite of their obvious flaws and dangers. It is clear that it would take a much more powerful trigger to motivate me to effect a significant change in my ideological proclivities.

The second trigger occurred several years later during a chance visit to the Yale College Bookstore in New Haven, Connecticut. On this trip, I came across what was, for me, a truly astonishing book. It was co-edited by a Yale professor, Ben Kiernan, and his colleague, Robert Gellately, and was entitled, *The Specter of Genocide, Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*. Reading it was shocking, because in spite of my “sophisticated” education, I realized that I was really under-informed and quite naïve about human beliefs and behavior.

I knew I had to do something about this deficiency and began reading Kiernan’s other books on the subject, as well as numerous books by other authors that offered detailed descriptions and explanations for the mass murders highlighted in *The Specter of Genocide*. These books showed me a view of life that I almost could not comprehend.

First, they demonstrated that the mass slaughter of humans has been a surprisingly frequent occurrence throughout history—there have been over one hundred instances in history where one hundred thousand or more people were killed.¹¹ Second, they showed that the killings and all that surrounded them unleashed a savagery, a degree of human brutality, and an amount of human suffering that was almost unimaginable. Third, they indicated that all peoples in all areas of the world had been participants in these atrocities at one time or another. And fourth, they made it obvious that a handful of history’s most pervasive ideologies had played an important role in the majority of the large scale killing incidents, either triggering, sustaining, rationalizing, or justifying these horrific actions.

Ideologies complicity in these horrific events and the extensive human suffering involved were the two most disturbing findings to come out of my research. Given that I had been so heavily invested in my own versions of these religious and political ideologies for so long, and

given that I had naively thought that these beliefs were beneficial for mankind, I found the four lessons learned quite upsetting. They raised a lot of questions for me.

How could I have been blind to the flaws of the ideologies that were so much a part of my life? How could I have been so unaware of the incalculable suffering people had experienced at the hands of leading ideologies? How could I not have seen the need to think through the implications and consequences of my beliefs? And how, given what I had learned about the Catholic Church years earlier, had I not realized a long time ago that my continuing commitment to these types of beliefs was unsustainable?

I felt, given my own failure to address these issues throughout my life, that it was time for me, now that I was retired, to make an effort to get answers to the questions I posed. This led me to embark on a serious and extensive program of study of ideologies and belief systems. In the process, I went on to read over one hundred books and dozens of journal articles that analyzed mass killing case histories, that defined the pros and cons of the religious and political belief systems involved, that spelled out and analyzed the sacred texts of leading religions, that described ideologies and the leaders that exploited them, that defined the outcomes of implementing ideologies in history, that studied the evolution of ideologies and their drivers, that provided alternatives to ideologies and ideological thinking, and that assessed the effectiveness of human thinking processes as they relate to belief formation.

This research was then distilled and became the basis for the views articulated in this book. What I learned from my analysis was quite different from what I had expected when I began the project. It turned out that the costs of embracing ideologies and ideological thinking were much worse than I expected, so much so that I was motivated to share the results with other

people. I wanted to help people understand what they are committing to when they accept ideologies without proper consideration.

I wrote this book to appeal to a mainstream audience, not an academic audience. I am focused on helping ordinary people, like myself, who are bound to old ideas that don't make sense any more, but who are unable to escape to a new and better, more objective reality. I know, from personal experience, that it is not easy to end our dependence on ideologies. But, it is something we all must do. We have to stand up for ourselves, rejecting ideologies imposed on us from on high in favor of defining our own beliefs and our own destiny.

The result is definitely worth the effort. Holding beliefs, based on objective reality rather than on faith, myths, or the manipulations of others, does in fact lead to superior outcomes. In the last chapter of this book, I show how the more analytic, fact-based approach has helped many people in all walks of life—including business, investments, sports, military conflict, and psychotherapy—outperform their peers. The difference in results is quite surprising.

I believe we all would benefit tremendously from facing the reality of our lives, taking full responsibility for our situations, making a thorough investigation of our beliefs, and then changing them accordingly. We need to be able to say: “I don't have to be afraid,” “I don't have to think what other people think,” “I can think for myself,” “I can break away and form my own destiny.”

Personally, I am a much happier and better person for having made the effort to develop a more accurate view of the world and change my perspective about what is true and what is not. I hope this book can assist you in your efforts to do the same.
