

# CONCLUSION: UNCOMMONLY COMMON KIN

*Who are you?*

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

“Our true nationality is mankind,” wrote H. G. Wells in his popular *Outline of History* (1920). This apparently genial sentiment, here cited from *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, seems kindly enough.<sup>1</sup> But the universalist sentiment militates inexorably against nonnationals, that is, against humanoid creatures, both terrestrial and extraterrestrial, who are deemed nonhuman or “racially inferior”—as Wells himself had suggested in *The War of the Worlds* (1898).<sup>2</sup>

Many apparently alternate kinship structures informing Western nationalism aim to become a “universal siblinghood”—an outlandish term suggesting an association of men and women that recognizes only one tribe of human beings, with no essential intergenerational, intragenerational, or gender differences. As we have seen, however, steps taken in the direction of universalizing homogeneity (“all men are my brothers”) are almost always matched by steps in the direction of heterogeneity (“others are animals”). The present book has examined the attempt to attain universalist kinship structure—or, as some sociologists have called it, “nonkinship”<sup>3</sup>—within a world of nations, and has pointed up some dangers of this impossible essay.

In the 1990s, half a century after two world wars, the veneration accorded to universalism is as disturbing in its political implications as the particularist nationalism that universalism pretends to eschew but actually merely defines by polar opposition. After all, the ideal of universal brotherhood—“All human beings are brothers; none are others”—offers no specifically human mediation between species and family, that is, recognizes no being that is both “other” and “human”

besides such partly domesticated borderline creatures, defining kin and kind, as pets, animal nurse mothers, and godmen. And so it makes virtually inevitable the slide away from the purportedly humane ideal.

The direction of the slide is toward a particularist actuality that excludes all nonfamily members from the human species: “Only my brothers are human; all others are animals.” This direction, which varies somewhat according to local tribal characteristics and involves diverse traditions about kindness to nonhuman-kind, is due mainly to distinct combinations of universalism’s inability to give up in good faith its ideal conflation of species and family (i.e., its doctrinal reluctance openly to surrender the field to tolerant particularism) together both with politically inevitable apprehensions about universalism’s actual end—“incest” or “celibacy” broadly understood—and with consequent internal needs to have or create outsiders and foes. (This perspective on universalism’s slide to a brutal particularism complements and politically qualifies several “commonsense” propositions adduced elsewhere to explain why social homogeneity, if it ever exists, always caves in to heterogeneity—for example, that making excessive demands often results in getting less than making moderate demands, or that there is an upper limit to the size of any discrete human group. Thus Aristotle teaches that the universal siblinghood—hence incest—hypothesized in Plato’s *Republic* is merely diluted kinship, and sociobiologists contend that human tribes, like dog packs and baboon troops, can get only so big before they divide or break up.)

The dehumanizing universalism that congratulates itself—sometimes sincerely, sometimes not—on its own humane intentions even as it conceals a parochial and imperialist particularism comes to despise and persecute the more realizably tolerant possibilities of openly particularist brotherhoods. Exemplary among these brotherhoods would be the politically disempowered bipartite particularism of Judaism—which distinguishes in good faith between brother Jews and those others who are both nonbrother and human—and the empowered tripartite particularism of Islamic Spain, which distinguishes in good faith both between brother Muslims and others and also between brother non-Muslims who are peoples of the Book and others who are pagan. (These examples of potentially tolerant particularism are Semitic mainly because Judaeo-Christianity’s distinctive deprecation of political attachment defines itself against Judaism and Islam; but all particularist ideologies, unlike universalist ideology, recognize explicitly the existence of human others, and some, like Judaism and Islam, have distinctive rules for tolerating others both human and animal.)

The universalist view that all human beings are equal siblings can take an apparently different ideological turn: not the dehumanizing version that nonsiblings are nonhuman but the twist—at once communalist and individualist—that because all human beings are siblings, every sibling is also a nonsibling. That twist allows various adamist, antinomian, and nationalist sects—including the Brethren of the Free Spirit and certain French revolutionaries and American communalists—to endorse what Shakespeare’s quintessential sister/Sister Isabella calls “a kind of incest.”<sup>4</sup>

This chaste incest is to the Christian tradition what the noble lie of political autochthony in Plato's *Republic* was to the Greek. It is the affinity reflected in Marguerite of Navarre's and Elizabeth Tudor's "distant-close"<sup>5</sup>—an extraordinary collapse of kin with nonkin whose tragic appearance in ordinary society, expressed in *Hamlet*, occurs only on the margins of kinship, a no-man's-land where sisters become wives and Sisters, or brothers become husbands and Brothers.

The same twist, individualist as well as communalist, allows protocapitalist Calvinist and other individualist sects to combine the particularist rule that a brother must not charge monetary interest with the universalist doctrine that all human beings are siblings, concluding that because every sibling is also a nonsibling, one can charge interest to any human creature. Taken together, the communalist and individualist tendencies inform a decisively modern and latently misanthropic drift from tribal brotherhood to universal otherhood, figured both in Melville's *Pierre* and in Catholic and revolutionary France, whence came to the American *Pierre*, as his ambiguously illegitimate sibling and lover, the orphan Isabel, "consecrated to God."

It would be intolerable to lay down at the doorstep of the universal (catholic) church or its nationalist secularized counterparts all the ills of the world. Nor would it be fruitful to blame the universalist doctrine, "All ye are brethren"—an inextricable component of Christianity's distinctive beliefs about the coming of the incarnate godman Christ and His spiritually incestuous Family—for the Catholic Inquisition's brutalizing emphasis on blood purity or for the millennialist Nazi dehumanization of others in German Christendom. After all, to some extent blood racism in fifteenth-century Spain was un-Christian: Pope Eugenius IV, for example, was at first distressed about the doctrine of blood purity.<sup>6</sup> And in twentieth-century German Christendom, Nazism presented itself expressly as anti-Christian: the Nazi swastika was non-Christian, the Nordic legends and Aryan mythologies of Nazi rituals effaced the Christian gospels, Fascist laws banned Christmas from the official books, and Nazi ideologists claimed that they sought their Supreme Being only in the *Volk*. ("We do not want any other god, only Germany," said Hitler.)

Yet the soil was decidedly Christian where "the mystical brotherhood" of the German SS flourished, and the Spanish ideology was Christian that encouraged the Catholic Inquisition. By virtue of its sometimes sincere belief and always bad faith, the genius of universalist imperial Christendom often dehumanized "others" through an ingratiating anthropomorphization of extraterrestrial gods and aestheticization of terrestrial creatures. The godman "Christ" and secular Christendom's perennially popular beautiful "Beast" matched the so-called primitives' collapse of the distinction between fellow tribesperson and human being—a necessary distinction for both coexistence and toleration.

Universalism's ideal cancellation of kinship by nonkinship was a necessary, although by no means sufficient, condition for the German extermination of Jews and Gypsies. By the same token, the disjuncture between the creed of universal love and Christendom's widespread practice of hatred and cruelty—to which Spi-

noza, among others, draws our attention in the case of the Iberian auto-da-fé and the expulsion of Muslims and Jews—comes not so much from hypocrisy as from various combinations of universalism's inevitable and essential failure to acknowledge its never-ending slip to particularism together with ancient racist obsessions—here Gothic—with who's who in Germania.

The skeptical philosopher's conviction that he does not know who's who—so that all sexual intercourse is possibly incestuous—here complements the perfected Catholic belief that everyone is essentially the same—so that all sexual intercourse is teleologically incestuous. (The parallel psychoanalytic persuasion is that almost all sexual intercourse is oneirologically incestuous.) Peoples' awareness of and concern with the indeterminability of kinship—say, the possible presence everywhere of illegitimate children, foundlings, and changelings—depends on varying economic, religious, and other demographic factors. For example, medieval Europe had myriad oblates and foundlings, while eighteenth-century France had bastards and orphans. But whatever the local level of conscious concern with the indeterminability of kinship, the virtual denial everywhere of literal blood kinship helps to explain the perennial popularity of that psychologically cathartic and sociologically reassuring fictional literature, from Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* to contemporary American television soap operas, where apparent nonkin are revealed to be kin (or apparent kin to be nonkin), as if sure revelation were possible anywhere *but* in fiction.

Through study of the intellectual place of kinship words or names, and hence the poetics or metaphors of the classification of kin and kind, literary study questions the problematic distinction between literal and fictive kinship—between biology and sociology, say, or nature and culture. We have seen how the conjoined twins in Twain's *Those Extraordinary Twins* might present the only case where literal (consanguineous) kinship is undeniably known; the ambiguously affined siblings in Melville's *Pierre* likewise present the otherwise universal case where literal kinship is undeniably unknown. Genetic and forensic science are ready, now as ever, to take on Tiresias' apparently artless question, "Do you know who your parents are?"—ready, that is, to remove it from the province of skeptical doubt. But the problem of doubt or skepticism about kinship relations—and, for that matter, about their nationalist and racist counterparts—cannot be tested or proved. Whether there is an unequivocal blood or DNA test to detect lineage or parentage and whether true parentage is other than consanguineous remain unsettled questions even in the 1990s. Like the child in the story of Solomon's judgment, we cannot truly know who our blood parents are—we could all be changelings, switched in the cradle—and there is no unshakeable answer to the question of our true parents. "The family is no more than a lexical area," or, stated differently, incest is a "nominative" crime or "surprise of vocabulary" that "consists in transgressing the semantic rule, in creating homonymy" (Barthes)<sup>7</sup>—in much the same way that the nation, with all its legitimate territorial claim, is the "accumulation of human beings who think they are one people" (Wells).<sup>8</sup>

The extraordinary status of universal kinship or nonkinship as both literal and figural, and also as neither literal nor figural, informs many ordinary nationalist ideologies. In a historical continuum paradigmatically including ancient Rome, medieval Spain, Renaissance England, seventeenth-century France and Holland, Enlightenment Germany, the French Revolution, nineteenth-century America, and twentieth-century Québec, we have seen how the universalist doctrine interacts with institutional issues involving affinities such as adoption, adrogation, autochthony, baptism, blood brotherhood, brotherhood-in-arms, carnal contagion, catenary lineage, class grouping, collactation, consanguinity, conversion, Eucharist bonding, feudal lordship, foster relationships, fratriarchy, friendship, gossipred, language, marriage, nobility, nomination, and oblation. All these mark societal articulations of universal with particular.

Elizabeth Tudor's "Glass of the Sinful Soul" suggests one hitch between the profane family life of the princess—charged by her royal father with being the illegitimate offspring of an incestuous union—and the subsequent reformation in Elizabethan England of the medieval Christian notion of universal siblinghood, where all men and women are equally kin or nonkin as children of adoption to Christ. This was the modern reformation into the idea of nation not as parentarchal institution but as liberal estate, an idea that still influences the politics of tolerant liberalism, with all its contradictions. Thanks to the orphaned Elizabeth's transmutation of fear of the desire for physical incest into a desire for spiritual incest (and also, of course, to the political exigencies of the time), there developed an ideology of national siblinghood where the "ruler" was simultaneously parent and child, sibling and spouse. Britain's exemplary transformation was part of a movement in early modern Europe toward becoming a polis bereft of ordinary kin, an ideological evolution that reversed the ancient Roman imperial family's and vestals' momentous conversion into the Catholic religious orders. One of these orders adopted the orphan Racine and prompted his *Britannicus*.

In the late eighteenth century many European states, having taken over from the church its role of administering orphanages and foundling homes, began to internalize specific aspects of ostensibly secularized medieval oblation into new rites of political "naturalization" and doctrines of nationhood. Thus Rousseau, founding father of the French Revolution, by way of explaining why he abandoned his consanguineous children, disingenuously confessed that, like a latter-day Hagar, he put them up for state adoption in such a way that he would never recognize them as grown ups. (Had not Plato said that in the ideal polis a person would greet everyone equally as a sibling?) In the 1790s France raised the children whose parents it had executed during the Terror, adoptively sublating them as "children of the nation." These children were quintessentially national *alumni*, like the passengers on nineteenth-century American orphan trains. Their new home helped to define a regime where everyone—liberal, equal, and fraternal—might be reborn from the common ground, as the national anthem stated. They were born, like Adam, from clay. Like the celebrated dragon's teeth that Cadmus sowed in the

earth, they sprang up, already naturalized, as humanoid Earthmen and Earthwomen uncommonly kin to none and all.

Yet the ancient promise of universal brotherhood, stranger to no creed, now turns, as always, into the particularist fraternity of Cain and Abel. Human beings, suspended between universal otherhood and tribal brotherhood, and still vertiginous from the last world war, want a general peace. However, we are unlikely soon to change our political being or patterns of loving—as if we were chrysalids about to become butterflies in some Wonderland. Particularist ideologies, which openly recognize that some beings outside of their familial or national neighborhood are human, would seem wonderfully essential to the missing peace—if, as we have surmised, they might also provide a temporary basis for treating human others reliably with Noachic common decency.

Toleration, with all the indeterminacy that it entails, is neither genial nor effortless. If ever we come to live a civilized existence, without the periodic catastrophes of war and genocide, it will be, still discontentedly, thanks to the endless adversities—pains without salve—that our own putting up with others imparts to us as a kind of political gadfly. This toleration goads us, at the very least, to avow openly the rightful coexistence of human terrestrials and national territories that we do not much like or like too much (because they are too little or too much like us). And it drives us to admit in good faith as ours the particularist likes and dislikes that constitute political and sexual being. Toleration likewise requires the never-ending vacillation between acknowledging that our kin are ours even as we know that it is deniable that they are, and denying that our kin are ours even as we recognize that it is probable that they are.