

# The Madness of Mankind

## Chapter 19

### 3001: The Final Odyssey

by

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... Back in Poole's century, a person's name often gave a clue to his/her appearance, but that was no longer true thirty generations later. Dr. Theodore Khan turned out to be a Nordic blond who might have looked more at home in a Viking longboat than ravaging the steppes of Central Asia; however, he would not have been too impressive in either role, being less than a hundred and fifty centimeters tall. Poole could not resist a little amateur psychoanalysis: small people were often aggressive overachievers--which, from Indra Wallace's hints, appeared. to be a good description of Ganymede's sole resident philosopher. Khan probably needed these qualifications to survive in such a practical-minded society.

Anubis City was far too small to boast a University campus--a luxury that still existed on the other worlds, though many believed that the telecommunications revolution had made it obsolete. Instead, it had something much more appropriate, as well as centuries older: an Academy, complete with a grove of olive trees that would have fooled Plato himself, until he had attempted to walk through it. Indra's joke about departments of philosophy requiring no more equipment than blackboards clearly did not apply in this sophisticated environment.

"It's built to hold seven people," said Dr. Khan proudly, when they had settled down on chairs obviously designed to be not-too-comfortable, "because that's the maximum one can efficiently interact with. And, if you count the ghost of Socrates, it was the number present when Phaedo delivered his famous address..."

"The one on the immortality of the soul?"

Khan was so obviously surprised that Poole could not help laughing.

"I took a crash course in philosophy just before I graduated--when the syllabus was planned, someone decided that we hairy-knuckled engineers should be exposed to a little culture."

"I'm delighted to hear it. That makes things so much easier. You know, I still can't credit my luck. Your arrival here almost tempts me to believe in miracles! I'd even thought of going to Earth to meet you--has dear Indra told you about my -- ah -- obsession?"

"No," Poole answered, not altogether truthfully.

Dr. Khan looked very pleased; he was clearly delighted to find a new audience.

"You may have heard me called an atheist, but that's not quite true. Atheism is unprovable, so uninteresting. However unlikely it is, we can never be certain that God once existed--and has now shot off to infinity, where no one can ever find him... Like Gnutams Buddha, I take no position on this subject. My field of interest is the psychopathology known as Religion."

"Psychopathology? That's a harsh judgment."

"Amply justified by history. Imagine that you're an intelligent extraterrestrial, concerned only with verifiable truths. You discover a species that has divided itself into thousands--no, by now millions--of tribal groups holding an incredible variety of beliefs about the origin of the universe and the way to behave in it. Although many of them have ideas in common, even when there's a ninety-nine percent overlap, the remaining one percent's enough to set them killing and torturing each other, over trivial points of doctrine, utterly meaningless to outsiders.

"How to account for such irrational behavior? Lucretius hit it on the nail when he said that religion was the by-product of fear--a reaction to a mysterious and often hostile universe. For much of human prehistory, it may have been a necessary evil--but why was it so much more evil than necessary--and why did it survive when it was no longer necessary?"

"I said evil--and I mean it, because fear leads to cruelty. The slightest knowledge of the Inquisition mares one ashamed to belong to the human species ... One of the most revolting books ever published was the Hammer of Witches, written by a couple of sadistic perverts and describing the tortures the Church authorized--encouraged!--to extract 'confessions' from thousands of harmless old women, before it burned them alive ... The Pope himself wrote an approving foreword!

"But most of the other religions, with a few honorable exceptions, were just as bad as Christianity... Even in your century, little boys were kept chained and whipped until they'd memorized whole volumes of pious gibberish, and robbed of their childhood and manhood to become monks ...

"Perhaps the most baffling aspect of the whole affair is how obvious madmen, century after century, would proclaim

that they--and they alone!--had received messages from God. If all the messages had agreed, that would have settled the matter. But of course they were wildly discordant--which never prevented self-styled messiahs from gathering hundreds--sometimes millions--of adherents, who would fight to the death against equally deluded believers of a microscopically differing faith."

Poole thought it was about time he got a word in edgewise.

"You've reminded me of something that happened in my hometown when I was a kid. A holy man--quote, unquote--set up shop, claimed he could work miracles--and collected a crowd of devotees in next to no time. And they weren't ignorant or illiterate; often they came from the best families. Every Sunday I used to see expensive cars parked round his--ah--temple.

"The 'Rasputin Syndrome,' it's been called: there are millions of such cases, all through history, in every country. And about one time in a thousand the cult survives for a couple of generations. What happened in this case?"

"Well, the competition was very unhappy, and did its best to discredit him. Wish I could remember his name--he used a long Indian one--Swami something-or-other--but it turned out he came from Alabama. One of his tricks was to produce holy objects out of thin air, and hand them to his worshippers. As it happened, our local rabbi was an amateur conjurer, and gave public demonstrations showing exactly how it was done. Didn't make the slightest difference; the faithful said that their man's magic was real, and the rabbi was just jealous.

"At one time, I'm sorry to say, Mother took the rascal seriously--it was soon after Dad had run off, which may have had something to do with it--and dragged me to one of his sessions. I was only about ten, but I thought . I'd never seen anyone so unpleasant-looking. He had a beard that could have held several bird's nests, and probably did."

"He sounds like the standard model. How long did he flourish?"

"Three-four years. And then he had to leave town in a hurry: he was caught running teenage orgies. Of course, he claimed he was using mystical soul-saving techniques. And you won't believe this--"

"Try me."

"Even then, lots of his dupes still had faith in him. Their god could do no wrong, so he must have been framed."

"Framed?"

"Sorry--convicted by faked evidence--sometimes used by the police to catch criminals, when all rise fails."

"Hmm. Well, your swami was perfectly typical: I'm rather disappointed. But he does help to prove my case--that most of humanity has always been insane, at least some of the time."

"Rather an unrepresentative sample--one small Flagstaff suburb."

"True, but I could multiply it by thousands--not only in your century, but all down the ages. There's never been anything, however absurd, that myriads of people weren't prepared to believe, often so passionately that they'd fight to the death rather than abandon their illusions. To me, that's a good operational definition of insanity."

"Would you argue that anyone with strong religious beliefs was insane?"

"In a strictly technical sense, yes--if they really were sincere, and not hypocrites. As I suspect ninety percent were."

"I'm certain that Rabbi Bernstein was sincere--and he was one of the sanest men I ever knew, as well as one of the finest. And how do you account for this? The only real genius I ever met was Dr. Chandra, who led the HAL project. I once had to go into his office--there was no reply when I knocked, and I thought it was unoccupied.

"He was praying to a group of fantastic little bronze statues, draped with flowers. One of them looked like an elephant ... another had more than the regular number of arms ... I was quite embarrassed, but luckily he didn't hear me and I tiptoed out. Would you say he was insane?"

"You've chosen a bad example: genius often is! So let's say: not insane, but mentally impaired, owing to childhood conditioning. The Jesuits claimed: 'Give me a boy for six years, and he is mine for life.' if they'd got hold of little Chandra in time, he'd have been a devout Catholic--not a Hindu."

"Possibly. But I'm puzzled--why were you so anxious to meet me? I'm afraid I've never been a devout anything. What have I got to do with all this?"

Slowly, and with the obvious enjoyment of a man unburdening himself of a heavy, long-hoarded secret, Dr. Khan told him.

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