

these apparently peaceful settlements without fortifications “the archaeological record shows that life was violent.” In fact, it shows just the opposite. But Armstrong’s version fits with her thesis that Axial Age spirituality was the product of a violent time in which religion and religious factions caused death and ceaseless struggle.

That vision, while intriguing, is altogether too facile. The Axial Age philosophies emerged from a violent milieu, true; but in almost every case they also came from societies that were becoming less closely knit and more misogynistic, possibly because of changes in technology. Armstrong attempts to draw parallels between Axial Age violence and today’s global inequities and other problems, but the references only highlight what has always been the most serious scholarly criticism of the Axial Age idea—its failure to consider social and economic strains that may have helped push these societies to such dramatic shifts in worldview.

Social justice and compassion did become key elements of Axial philosophies, but Armstrong fails to convince us that these were primarily the products of a spiritual transformation. Couldn’t the moral breakthroughs she attributes to spiritual geniuses have been the early stirrings of an underclass as society became more complex and produced more pressing inequities? A book less driven by Armstrong’s preconceptions might have allowed room to consider the down-to-earth changes that may have played a role in these revolutions of the spirit.

—Sandra Scham

Was He Crazy?

IN 1737, A MAN NAMED ALEX-
ander Cruden published an index
to all substantive words in the
King James Bible. It was 1,200
pages long and took 12 years to
compile. Cruden completed it
with no financial backing and,
unlike the authors of other biblical
concordances, with no one’s help.
And he did so in his spare time,

**ALEXANDER THE
CORRECTOR:**
The Tormented
Genius Whose
*Cruden’s
Concordance
Unwrote the Bible.*

By Julia Keay.
Overlook.
269 pp. \$23.95

when he wasn’t working or being hospitalized for insanity. Cruden’s earlier biographers make much of his insanity. Julia Keay, a writer and broadcaster, thinks they’ve got him wrong. “Such monumental and meticulous scholarship” could not have come from an insane mind, she says, and to prove it, she begins by laying out the few ascertainable facts of Cruden’s life.

Cruden was raised in Aberdeen, Scotland, and wanted to be a minister. But before he could begin religious training, he fell in love with a clergyman’s daughter who turned out to be pregnant by her own brother. She rejected Cruden, who pursued her so persistently that his friends had him locked up as a lunatic. On being released he left town, ending up in London as a “corrector of the press,” or proofreader. There he began working on his concordance:

If he couldn’t be a minister, he could at least aid the spread of God’s word. When it was done, he published it himself by selling subscriptions. Concordances had been compiled before, but none was as comprehensive as Cruden’s.

He courted a rich widow, who told him he’d misread her friendliness and rejected him. Another of her suitors had him committed to a madhouse again. While there, Cruden kept a diary in which he referred to himself as “The Prisoner.” When he got out, he published his diary and brought a lawsuit against the madhouse, which he lost. His sister recommitted him when he got into a violent incident after apparently trying to break up a street fight. Again he kept a diary, this time referring to himself as “Alexander the Corrector,” and, upon his release, not only published the diary but tried unsuccessfully to get the government to appoint him the official corrector of the people’s morals. Turned down, he took correction to the streets and meekly asked people to go to church and not to swear.

A second edition of the concordance in 1758 made



Alexander Cruden

him famous and financially secure, and he stopped calling himself the Corrector. He began helping people in need (prisoners, destitute families), did a third edition, moved back to Aberdeen, drew up a will, and died while praying. His only personal bequest was to Christiana Blackwell, the daughter of an Aberdeen clergyman.

The question, then, is how Cruden's scholarship and productivity, and the diligence necessary to "unwrite" the Bible into index form, could have coexisted with insanity. Keay contends that he wasn't insane at all but the victim of a sequence of wrongful committals, all resulting from the first. She tries to fill in the biographical gaps. The first committal to a madhouse, she argues, must have been ordered by the clergyman father of Cruden's first love, to keep the shame

The more Cruden published and sued and argued that he was sane and the object of conspiracy, the crazier he seemed.

of the girl's pregnancy by her brother secret, though Keay has no evidence of who the girl or her father was, or of whether Cruden knew she was pregnant. But Keay thinks the episode

shaped Cruden's life, so she identifies the girl by arguing that Christiana Blackwell's mother, Elizabeth, must also have been Christiana's father's sister. In this version, Cruden's first committal was fraudulent, his second the action of a jealous suitor, and his last that of a malevolent sister. And the more Cruden published and sued and argued that he was sane and the object of conspiracy, the crazier he seemed.

The story is plausible—psychiatric treatment was still in the age of leeches and bleeding, and committals and releases must have been frequently arbitrary. But it has too much unsupported guesswork, too many imagined motives and unlikely villains. Couldn't Cruden have been as insane as everyone said he was, but with an insanity that came and went—a condition that psychiatrists might recognize and diagnose today? Keay argues her version of Cruden's story intensely, but she doesn't claim certainty. Making up stories based on the little you know about other people is one of life's pleasures. This book is fun in the same way,

and so well written that the pages turn themselves. And whether or not Cruden was insane, his concordance has gone through some 60 editions and, 250 years later, is still in print.

—Ann Finkbeiner

HISTORY

Weapons of Fear

LIKE MANY OTHER JOURNALISTS, I covered the 2003 Iraq war with my gas mask close to hand. Fumbling it onto my face while dashing down to some Kuwaiti basement, or bundling it into a pillow to snatch some

sleep inside Iraq, I came to see it as a constant part of life. But more than that, it was a talisman against the creeping fear of a most dreadful kind of war. The fear had to be taken seriously because Iraq had, in fact, used chemical weapons and nerve gas before—on its own Kurds at Halabja in March 1988, and against Iranian troops on the Al Faw peninsula the following month.

For all its psychological comfort, the gas mask would not have afforded much protection. Saddam Hussein favored the odorless sarin, a lethal nerve gas that had been developed by the IG Farben group in Nazi Germany. Like other classic nerve agents, sarin can be absorbed through the skin, causing convulsions, paralysis, and other symptoms, so for serious protection a full-scale protective suit of activated charcoal with sealed cuffs is required. This book begins with a chilling description of young recruits at the U.S. Army Chemical School in Missouri training in these "MOP suits," exposed to sarin and to a series called the V-agents, produced jointly by the British, Canadians, and Americans during the Cold War.

There remains a powerful taboo against the use of chemical weapons. Just as the Cold War was defined in one sense by the determination on both sides not to use nuclear weapons, our current war on terrorism will be shaped in large measure by

WAR OF NERVES:
Chemical Warfare
From World War I
to Al Qaeda.

By Jonathan B. Tucker.
Pantheon. 479 pp. \$30