

***Meta-atheism: Religious Avowal as Self-Deception*¹ [Excerpts]**

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1. Introduction

...I regularly teach an introductory course in philosophy in which I discuss the standard arguments for the existence of God. The exercise has produced in me a certain incredulity: I have come increasingly to wonder how such extremely smart people, like Aquinas or Descartes, could advance such patently bad arguments, as I think most philosophers (even those who claim to “believe”) would take those arguments to be. At any rate, I find it hard to believe that anyone really buys the “ontological argument,” or any of Aquinas’ “five ways.” ... [T]hese arguments don’t remotely establish their intended conclusion, the existence of anything like the traditional Christian God with His astounding properties of, e.g., eternality, omniscience, omnipotence and necessary benevolence (for brevity, I’ll refer to these latter properties as “omni” properties, a being possessing them as an “omni” being)... So, I began to wonder whether the arguments were ever really seriously endorsed; and this led me to wonder whether anyone actually believed their conclusion. That is, I began to wonder whether anyone really did believe in God.

Well, clearly lots of people claim to, and seem to live and sometimes die for their religious views.² It’s certainly risky for me to second-guess them on that score just because I think their arguments are bad --after all, don’t people know what they themselves believe, and believe what they sincerely avow, whether or not their arguments are any good? Maybe not. People seem to be susceptible to all manner of ignorance, confusion and often deeply motivated distortions of their own psychological lives.³ ... [T]here’s also the phenomenon of *self-deception*: people often claim to believe things that they merely *want* or are in some way *committed* to believing, even though “at some level” they know the belief is false. Simple examples [include] people ignoring the symptoms they have of some dread disease, or the obvious evidence of the infidelities of a spouse; or doting parents exaggerating, even to themselves, the talents of their child... In all these cases, it is because we have reason to suppose that the people involved are otherwise quite intelligent enough to draw the conclusions that they consciously resist that we suppose there must be something else at work.

My hunch about what passes as “religious belief” is that it frequently involves self-deception... And so I find myself taking seriously the following hypothesis, which (for lack of a better name) I call *meta-atheism*:

Despite appearances, many Western adults who’ve been exposed to standard science and sincerely claim to believe in God are self-deceived; at some level they believe the claim is false.

Lest the reader think my view merely a peculiar pet idea of my own, it’s worth noting ... that substantially the same view was set out by John Stuart Mill in a passage in Chapter 2 of his *On Liberty*. It’s so close to what I want to defend, and provides such nice evidence of his own, that I quote it at length:

...By Christianity I here mean what is accounted such by all churches and sects — the maxims and precepts contained in the New Testament. These are considered sacred, and accepted as laws, by all professing Christians. Yet it is scarcely too much to say that not one Christian in a thousand guides or tests his individual conduct by reference to those laws... All Christians believe that the blessed are the poor and humble, and those who are ill-used by the world; that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a

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² For the record, I myself did (seem to) believe in God for a while when I was very young, assiduously attending church, praying and confessing my peccadillos. But it didn’t survive my learning the rudiments of science, which led me to regard religious claims as wishful thinking. Ironically enough, the very humility that I had been taught to be a virtue made me conclude that one ought to respect the independence of the world from our wishes: atheism came to seem to me the only genuinely religious attitude.

³ Much of what I’ll say here is continuous with the view I began to set out in my (1987) (and hope to improve elsewhere). See the other essays in McLaughlin and Rorty (1987), as well as Bach (1981), and Moran (2001) for related views.

needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven; that they should judge not, lest they be judged; that they should swear not at all; that they should love their neighbor as themselves; ... that if they would be perfect, they should sell all that they have and give it to the poor. They are not insincere when they say that they believe these things. They do believe them, as people believe what they have always heard lauded and never discussed. But in the sense of that living belief which regulates conduct, they believe these doctrines just up to the point to which it is usual to act upon them. The doctrines in their integrity are serviceable to pelt adversaries with; and it is understood that they are to be put forward (when possible) as the reasons for whatever people do that they think laudable. But any one who reminded them that the maxims require an infinity of things which they never even think of doing would gain nothing but to be classed among those very unpopular characters who affect to be better than other people. The doctrines have no hold on ordinary believers — are not a power in their minds.

Mill addresses here only some of the distinctive moral claims of Christianity... My own interest includes the moral claims, but extends well beyond them, to the cluster of “supernatural” metaphysical claims regarding not only God’s existence, but, e.g., the prospects of a Hereafter, the sacrifice of Jesus, the creation of the world.

Notice that, strictly speaking, meta-atheism doesn’t entail atheism: it’s a view not about *God* and whether *He* exists, but about whether people actually *believe* that He does.⁴ Even people who take themselves to be serious theists might find this thesis interesting, if only for the light it sheds upon the difficulty (sometimes noted by the devout) of actually believing. But, of course, my own interest in the view is in fact motivated by what seems to me the overwhelming obviousness of atheism. I’m afraid that I really don’t think the question of the existence of God is much more “open” than the question of the existence of leprechauns or ghosts.

In §2 of what follows I will set out briefly what I take to be the obvious reasons to disbelieve in God. This will be brief, since I will be concerned not to deal with every argument that has been presented for God’s existence, which has been done more than amply by others, but want merely to show that the reasons for disbelief are overwhelmingly *obvious*... [T]he reasons for atheism are not dependent upon any subtle or arcane philosophical issues, but merely on the sort of common sense that is used and supported by ordinary reasoning about most any non-religious topic... It is in view of this obviousness that I will then consider in §3 a number of different sorts of evidence that suggest that people who avow religious claims are self-deceived. However, since I actually don’t think self-deception is always a bad thing, I want to conclude in §4 with a brief discussion of whether it nevertheless might be so in the religious case...

I should emphasize that I don’t mean to be particularly smug or self-righteous about my hypothesis, or pretend to be very much less self-deceived than the next person. Self-deception and other discrepancies between our real and avowed attitudes seem to me quite widespread, may be unavoidable, and are often entirely salutary and benign (nothing like a little self-deception to keep an otherwise querulous family together!). Paradoxical though it may sound, I can think of a number of areas in my own life where I regularly practice self-deception (though, for it to be effective, I musn’t dwell on the fact for too long)... But of course some cases may be more benign than others, an issue I’ll address in §4.

I don’t presume for a moment to be able to *establish* the claim of meta-atheism. I certainly recognize that there’s a lot to be said that would appear to argue against it. Much depends upon far more detailed empirical research than I’m in a position to do... All that I really hope to do here is to put my hypothesis in the running, calling attention to a number of striking peculiarities of religious thinking that I think it may help explain...

⁴ Hence the prefix ‘meta-’ which, in philosophy, has come to mean, roughly, ‘at a second-order level about...’. I prefix it to ‘atheism’ only to make clear the alliance with that view. I learned too late that the term has been previously used by LaCroix (1993) for a quite different hypothesis, with which, however, I think there is no danger of confusing the view I am advancing here.

2. 'God' and the Standard Justifications.

...The simplest argument for atheism is that one should disbelieve a hypothesis whose expected consequences don't mesh with any evidence. More bluntly: *absence of evidence is evidence of absence* –at least after you've looked. If you poke around enough in the places where it would be reasonable to expect evidence of X and you don't find any, that's a pretty good reason to believe there is no X. This is surely why sensible people don't believe in elves, fairies, or the bogeyman under the bed. You look under the bed at random times, check the locks on windows and doors, make discreet inquiries about other beds in the neighborhood, and so forth. Of course, a sufficiently frightened child could remind you that no finite number of inquiries or peeks under the bed could logically establish there wasn't a very clever and maybe incorporeal bogeyman; but you then might point out that commonsense and science wouldn't get very far if they took every such mere "logical" possibility equally seriously. At a certain point, we simply have to rely on "inference to the best explanation" of all the evidence we can get, and accept, at least provisionally, conclusions that have been shown in this way to be true "beyond a reasonable doubt." These are not processes that anyone yet seriously understands, but they are ones on which jury trials and the rest of our lives manifestly depend.

The well-known "problem of evil" in the case of God is just a special case of this strategy: one would reasonably expect an omni-being to have created a moral world; the patent lack of such a world (in the plethora of cases that have nothing to do with "free will") provides reason to doubt there's any such being, as does the overall poor record of answered prayers (where one remembers to count not only positive anecdotes, but all of the failures people tend not to remember).

And note that this argument doesn't justify mere agnosticism: people are presumably not agnostic about bogeymen; rather, it justifies full disbelief. What's bad enough for bogeymen is bad enough for God.⁵

[The remainder of this section covers many of the same arguments for God's existence that we've already covered, so I'm omitting it from this excerpted version. -JCF]

3. Reasons for Meta-Atheism

There seem to me to be roughly the following eleven reasons to suppose that anyone subjected to a standard Anglo-European high school education knows at some level that standard theistic claims are false (some of the reasons overlap):

3.1 Obviousness of the Considerations Raised in §2: The kinds of considerations I raised in the previous section are ones, it seems to me, to which any moderately educated adult is readily sensitive... [I]n discussing these things, I have been at pains to raise only *commonsensical* considerations, of the sort that are regularly raised in, e.g., popular science, courtroom arguments, and mystery novels, where people regularly second-guess detectives, juries, attorneys about relevant evidence and argument...

3.2 Patent Sophistry of Religious Arguments: As regards the standard theological arguments, I submit that *were any of the reasonings presented in any other context, their advocates would readily recognize them as sophistical*. As Guanillo cogently pointed out to Anselm, no one would accept the ontological argument about any other domain, e.g., regarding the perfect island or perfect demon [or a *perfect car*, the example we used in class]. And most of the advocates readily recognize the blatant fallacies (regarding, e.g., infinity, probability, quantifier order) of existing forms of the arguments, as soon as they are pointed out.⁶ For example, most would agree if they were examining

⁵ Plantinga (2000) claims he doesn't see why "explanatorily idle hypotheses" (ones for which there's no evidence) should be disbelieved; after all, he argues, "maybe I don't know of any phenomena that I can explain only by supposing there is intelligent life on other planets. Should I then deny that there is any such life? Wouldn't simple agnosticism be sufficient?" (p371). But this ignores both the reasonable antecedent probabilities relevant to that example, as well the obvious qualification I added: "after you've looked...where it would be reasonable to expect evidence." If, after we did look for all reasonable signs of extra-terrestrial life, we still don't find any, then, sure, that's a reason to disbelieve. It's just that we know full well in this case, unlike that of God, it's real hard to look. One wonders why Plantinga doesn't believe in ghosts, bogeymen, or the man in the moon.

⁶ See Sober (2004) for a standard discussion of these fallacies, and Plantinga (1974) for an excellent example of a theist sensitive to at least many of them. Of course, he and others go on to try to *repair* the arguments. Others, if they are interested, come along and expose the further fallacies; and so it goes. Self-deception and the exposure of it is hard work.

some domain outside of religion that, even if every event had a cause, this doesn't imply that there was somewhere a *single* cause for everything, much less that that cause had a mind...

3.3 Tolerance of Otherwise Insane and Horrific Claims: I don't think you need to be an atheist to have the reaction I've mentioned to the content of religious claims. Were the claims about a supernatural entity who loves, commands, scolds, forgives, etc., to be encountered in a fashion removed from the rich, "respectable" aesthetic and cultural traditions in which they are standardly presented, they would be widely regarded as delusional, if not psychotic. A friend of mine was raised as a Catholic, and, as a child, had been taught that the lives of saints were the models by which one was supposed to live, and so one day she proceeded to eat ashes with her breakfast, in emulation of St. Therèse of Lisieux. Her otherwise quite devout mother was horrified, and admonished her never to do anything so foolish again. (Consider how much more horrified she would have been were she to be presented at communion with an actual piece of a human body and a glass of real blood!) Or, think of how most normal, even religious people react to hippies who --sometimes in emulation of Jesus-- forsake their worldly goods to wander and proselytize among the poor; or to people who murder their children because "God told them to" (just as He told Abraham!); or to the claims of the Koresh cult in Texas, or the recent "Heaven's Gate" cult surrounding the Hale-Bopp comet --and then remember that many religions were themselves once just such "cults" (see in this regard the work of the noted Biblical scholar, Elaine Pagels 1979)...

It's a useful exercise in general to note people's reactions when idiosyncratic religious claims are presented to them in a way that disguises their usual religious context. I regularly begin a class casually recounting to my students a story I claim to have recently read about a local judge who, confronted with a confessed murderer whom he knew and loved, decided to release him, and went home and shot his son to atone for the crime instead... If I tell the story casually enough, the look of horror and incredulity is striking on the faces of many students who don't immediately see the analogy with the familiar sacrifice of Christ. In a similar vein, even the noted theistic philosopher Robert Adams (1999) writes:

What would you think if you asked your neighbor why he was building a large stone table in his backyard, and he said, 'I'm building an altar, because God has commanded me to sacrifice my son as a whole burnt offering. Won't you come to the ceremony tomorrow morning?' All agree that the neighbor should be committed to a mental hospital. --(p284)

Or consider the claims of the Old Testament that are routinely recited at Jewish Passover seders. I, myself, have enjoyed many seders, and am embarrassed to confess that I have cheerily sat through the reading of the passages of Exodus (7-12) that describe the dozen plagues that God visited upon the Egyptians, that culminate in the "death of the first born":

And at midnight Yahweh struck down all the first-born in Egypt from the first-born of Pharaoh...to the first-born of the prisoner in the dungeon, and the first-born of all the livestock... There was a great wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without its dead. --(Exo 12:29-31, *New Jerusalem Bible*, New York, Doubleday 1985)

I think it's typical of our responses to religious material that it took some deliberate and explicit thought on my part (and I find this to be true of many others) to realize that what is being described is outright *genocide*. Perhaps Pharaoh is responsible for the enslavement of the Jews, and so perhaps he and his henchmen deserve to be punished; but surely this is not true of the children of the prisoners in his dungeon, or of the thousands of other Egyptian kids. Of course, when humans wage war, it's hard to avoid "collateral damage" and the killing of innocent civilians. But this killing of the first-born wasn't collateral. It was deliberate and vindictive. In any case, surely *God* had the power to be more selective. This specific, regularly celebrated genocide isn't an isolated event: Yahweh often destroyed whole cities and their inhabitants, as in the case of the Flood (Gn 6), Sodom and Gomorrah (Gn 19), Jericho, Ai, Hazor and others (Jos 6-11). When Israelites consorted with Midianite⁷ women, Yahweh visits on them a plague in

⁷ To be sure, much of this latter genocide occurs at the hands of Joshua, but he is clearly acting from express orders from Yahweh (Jos 11:15-16). In the case of Jericho the Israelites "enforced [Yahweh's] curse of destruction on everyone in the city: men and women, young and old..." Jos 6:21-1; 8:24-6). In the case of Hazor, "in compliance with the curse of destruction, they put every living creature there to the sword. Not a living soul was left, and Hazor was burnt to the ground" (Jos 11:11). Note, by the way, that Sodom is destroyed merely because some of its men are apparently gay (Gen19:5). In what seems to be a psychotic

which twenty-four thousand die “on account of the business” (Nb 25). It’s of course not particularly surprising that ancient tribes engaged in such practices. What’s bizarre is that people today still claim to revere such texts and worship the figure who instigated or condoned them. Of course, there may well be alternative readings and translations of the texts. But what is crucial to the present point is, say, that *present day English speakers read and claim to take seriously the texts as they are presently translated* (and quoted here). This is what beggars belief.

Again, it’s instructive to imagine reading these claims in a different tradition: suppose we found some group of Germans that were regularly reciting “sacred” Nazi texts that similarly described and approved the slaughter of Jews; or some descendants of Al Qaeda revering the texts of Osama bin Laden (and, in fairness, suppose they weren’t *acting* on the genocidal policies, any more than present days Jews are). Would we really tolerate apologia, appeals to “tradition,” or “denials of the Holocaust”? It seems to me nothing short of astounding that rabbis, ministers and priests who (rightly) excoriate Nazis, Al Qaeda and Holocaust deniers, at the same extoll the wisdom of the Torah and the Bible, and don’t regularly and emphatically repudiate the passages that seem to endorse the very same kinds of acts.⁸ At best, it seems nothing short of self-deceptive rationalization or bizarre blindness (which I shared for many years) to the offensive passages.

3.4 Reliance on Texts and Authorities: Many of the otherwise outlandish religious claims derive an air of legitimacy, of course, from their reliance on a specific set of usually archaic *texts* or other ultimate religious authorities, whose claims are presented *dogmatically* (indeed, the primary meaning of ‘dogma’ has precisely to do with religious proclamations). The texts or authorities standardly serve as the *sole* basis for various claims (e.g. that God exists, that Jesus is the son of God) that are regarded as essentially incontestable –certainly not often contested on the basis of any non-textual evidence. As many have noted (e.g Wittgenstein 1966, Plantinga 2000:370), they are not presented as *hypotheses*, to be either confirmed or disconfirmed by further research. They are usually adopted or renounced not on the basis of serious evidence, but as a matter of “faith” or “conversion” (see also §3.10 below).

Faith in texts and ultimate authorities, of course, raises countless theoretical and practical problems, familiar from the history of religious strife. Most obviously: how do you know which (translation, interpretation of a) text or authority to trust? Why believe one of them does and the other does not express “the word of God”? It is common knowledge that the familiar Bible is at least in part the result of the efforts of a great many ordinary mortals, as susceptible to “sin” and error as anyone, working in very different languages, different times and conditions, embroiled in now this now that religious and political controversy (see Pagels 1979, 2003). One would think it would behoove someone worried about which version genuinely reflected God’s word to be constantly trying to sift through the intricate historical details, anxiously ascertaining which writers really did have a main line to God, before placing their faith imprudently in the wrong ones. However, so far as I have heard, serious biblical scholarship has little effect on most people’s actual religious practices.⁹

This all contrasts dramatically with science and common-sense, where *there are patently no such sacred creeds, texts or ultimate authorities*. Of course, there are textbooks and *provisional* authorities, but these are quite frequently challenged, the texts revised and updated as the result of further research (Newton’s classic *Principia* is seldom read outside of historical research; Einstein’s specific proposals for a unified field theory are viewed as forlorn). Outside of religion, we know very well that truths about the world are not revealed *per se* by the contents of some text or the revelation of some individual. Indeed, as the history of quantum physics has shown in often startling ways, there is

frenzy of homophobia, Yahweh, in response “rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire of his own sending. He overthrew these cities and the whole plain, with all the people living in the cities and everything that grew there” (Gen 19:23-6). It is nothing short of astounding that people offended by homosexuality do not seem to be the least bit offended by God’s horrific reaction.

⁸ In a recent symposium at Notre Dame University, the philosopher Louise Antony drew attention not only to the many genocides, but to the serious moral quandries in which He places Adam and Eve in the garden, as well as Abraham with regard to Isaac, and numerous other incidents that she argues indicate that the God of the Old Testament is depicted more a sociopathic, abusive parent than as any sort of loving one. It was striking that, in their replies, Antony’s commentators, religious philosophers Eleanor Stump and Nicholas Wolterstorff, didn’t substantially challenge her reading, or unequivocally deplore such texts. Wolterstorff claimed that the stories should be taken as hyperbolic parables that are not literally true, but are “good at least for children and young people.” Parables of genocide?! Again, imagine Germans defending Nazi screeds in this way.

⁹ How many Christians, for example, have been worried about the admonitions against prayer and charity attributed to Jesus in the recently discovered Thomas Gospel? See Pagels 2003:p229#14.

no claim so sacrosanct that some good scientist (or scientifically minded philosopher) might not reasonably challenge it.¹⁰ ...

3.5 Detail Resistance: This continual revision and adjustment of ordinary beliefs is related to the multifarious ways ... they are interconnected, any one of them having logical or evidential relations to indefinite numbers of the others. For example, beliefs about whether O.J. Simpson murdered Nicole are connected to beliefs about cars, freeways, airports, police, DNA –which in turn connects them to beliefs about cities, governments, history and even cosmology. And one expects there to be in this way *indefinite numbers of details* that could be filled out in regard to these connections. If doubts are raised about the details, they can rebound to any one of the connected beliefs: thus, evidence against a particular theory of DNA would have given jurors less reason to believe that O.J. was at the scene of the crime. And if someone were to suggest that some third party murdered Nicole, then one would expect there to be further details –e.g., further fingerprints, DNA– that would serve as crucial evidence. If there were *no* such details, one would be (as many were) reasonably sceptical: again, as everyone knows, absence of evidence is evidence of absence.

By contrast, literally understood, religious claims are oddly *detail-resistant*. Perhaps the most dramatic cases are the claims about creation. Whereas scientists regularly ask about the details of the “Big Bang” --there is an entire book, for example, about what happened in the first three minutes (see Weinberg 1977)-- it seems perfectly silly to inquire into similar details of just how God did it. Just how did his saying, “Let there be light,” actually bring about light? How did He “say” anything at all (does He have a *tongue*)? Or, if He merely “designed” the world or the species in it, how did He do this (are there blueprints of the individual particles/ animals)? Was it just the quarks, the DNA, or the whole body? Or just some general directives that were executed by some angelic contractors? ... Does anyone really think there is some set of truths answering these questions? Perhaps; but it is striking how there is nothing like the systematic research on them, in anything like the way that there is massive, on-going systematic research into the indefinitely subtle details of biology, physics and cosmology. As Kitcher (1982:ch 5) points out, even so-called “Creation Science” is concerned only with resisting evolutionary biology, not with seriously investigating any of the massive details that would be required for the Creation story actually to be confirmed. And even for those who regard evolution as simply the manner of God’s creation, there still is (so far as I know) not the slightest interest in investigating, say, radio-isotopes, sedimentary layers and the fossil record to establish precisely how, when and where God had any role whatsoever in the creation of atoms, compounds, amino acids, DNA and so forth that are manifestly required for the development of life, consciousness and intelligent capacities. Despite what they claim, theists in fact treat Him as an idle wheel that does no serious explanatory work...

Some of this resistance to detail could, of course, be attributed to intellectual sloth. But not all of it. After all, if the religious stories really were true, an incredible lot would depend upon getting the details right (for many religious people, if you believe the *wrong* story, you could risk winding up in hell *forever!*). However, when I ask “believers” these kinds of questions of detail, I am invariably met with incredulity that I even think they’re relevant.

I find there are three standard reactions: people either insist that the claims are not to be understood literally (in which case, fine: they are not literally believed); or they appeal to “mystery” (to which I will return shortly); but more often they simply *giggle* or make some other indication that I can’t possibly be asking these questions seriously. The questions are regarded as somehow *inappropriate*. I have never encountered the kind of response that would be elicited by questions about how, e.g., O.J. got to the airport in time, or about just how big the Bang was. To these latter questions, people will, of course, usually find the question *relevant*, and maybe even interesting. They might not *know* the answer, and perhaps not particularly *care* to find out: but they appreciate its *pertinence* and assume there is some intelligible way of finding out –and that, if there’s not, or the answer came out wrong, then that would be a reason to doubt the purported event actually occurred.

3.6 Similarity to Fiction: This resistance to detail is strikingly similar to the same resistance one encounters in dealing with fiction. It seems as silly to ask the kind of detailed questions about God as it does for someone to ask for details about fictional characters, e.g.: What did Hamlet have for breakfast? Just how did the tornado get Dorothy and Toto to Oz? These questions are obviously silly and have no real answers –the text pretty much exhausts what can be said about the issues. In keeping with the reliance on texts and appeals to non-literality that we’ve already noted, religious claims seem to be understood to be fiction from the start.

¹⁰ Consider, for example, Hilary Putnam’s (1975) proposal to revise basic logic in view of quantum problems...

Another indication that religious stories are understood as more akin to fiction than to factual claims is the aforementioned toleration of what would otherwise be patently delusional and bizarre claims. In fictions, we standardly enjoy all manner of deviation from “naturalism” not only in matters of fact, but even in how we react. My own favorite examples in this regard are Wagner operas, which (I confess) move me terribly. But it matters a lot that it’s fiction. In the first act of *Lohengrin*, for example, Elsa is accused of having murdered her brother. Instead of demanding some *evidence* for such an awful charge, she falls to her knees and prays that a knight in shining armor should come and vanquish her accuser; and when he shows up –on a swan!– he agrees to do so and marry her on the spot –but only on condition she never asks who he is! Were I to witness an event like this in real life, and the people were *serious*, I would regard them as completely out of their minds. But in the opera I am deeply moved –just as I am by the Passion story of the sacrifice of Christ, as a *story*, even though I would be thoroughly appalled and disgusted were it the history of an *actual, intentional sacrifice*.

3.7 Merely Symbolic Status of the Stories: Indeed, notice that much of the power of religious claims doesn’t really consist in their literal *truth*. Imagine, again, a judge in a real court, considering an appropriate punishment for the sins of man, and let’s accept the idea of an innocent person being sacrificed to expiate someone *else’s* sins. But now ask whether, in the specific case of Jesus, He actually did suffer *enough*. I don’t mean to say that His betrayal and crucifixion weren’t pretty awful; but can one afternoon on a cross (with the prospect of Sunday in heaven) really “balance” *all* of the “sins” of Genghis Khan, Hitler, Stalin, or what death squads routinely do to their victims in Latin America? These are crucifixions multiplied *many a million fold*. –But, of course, all of this is less relevant if we are to take the passion story as merely symbolic fiction, i.e. not as an actual rectifying of wrongs. Mere symbols, after all, needn’t share the magnitudes of what they symbolize...

3.8 Peculiarly Selective Perspectives: Related to detail resistance is a peculiar skewing of perspective on the world that keeps obviously disturbing details conveniently out of sight. Plantinga’s (2001:174) appeal to the happy effects of bits of natural scenery (mountains, sea, flowers...) is, of course, quite familiar and easy to appreciate, even for a godless sinner like myself. But, of course, these bits are not really very representative of the world as a whole. Tastes may vary here, but it’s not clear that on balance the majority of the devout are seriously prepared to regard most portions of the universe as suggestive of an omni-God... [T]hey know that a biological war of all against all likely leaves most animals starving, diseased and scared; and that most of human life ends in humiliating misery, perfectly nice people wasting away from awful diseases and mental deteriorations, often unable to recognize family and friends, much less retain any wisdom they may have gained (Can anyone seriously think that Alzheimer’s helps in the building of a better immortal soul?). Of course, it’s perfectly fine to be selective about what one focuses upon and enjoys; it’s self-deception only if it leads one to avow hypotheses that you know to be belied by the majority of the evidence...

3.9 Appeals to Mystery: Confronted with many of the above problems, many theists claim God is a “mystery”... But ignorance (=mystery) is standardly a reason to *not* believe something. Imagine the police arresting you merely because it’s a “mystery” how you could have murdered Smith!... [I]f it’s really a complete mystery how God designed or created the world and permits so much pointless suffering, then obviously that’s a reason to suspect it’s simply not true that He did –and, my point is that this is sufficiently obvious that everyone knows it, and simply pretends that religion affords some very odd exception.

Many theists are often willing to tolerate the mysteries surrounding God because they have an additional belief, viz., that they also can’t know about God’s ways. Now, first of all, this is disingenuous: there are all the things they claim about His omni-properties, as well as, crucially, what He likes and dislikes (if literally *nothing* is known about God –even that He exists– then the whole issue is surely moot). Moreover, many people claim that He’s responsible for when people live and die, and think He’s the sort of being that will be responsive to petitionary prayer. But these then are precisely the points at which the God hypothesis is vulnerable to obvious disconfirmation: too much happens that’s hard to believe is the result of an omni-being, too little that is plausibly an answer to prayer.

Of course, people do tolerate plenty of mysteries about how the world works. Most people have only the dimmest idea about how things live and grow, or how intentions actually bring about action. But in these cases the evidence for the postulated processes is overwhelming and uncontroversial: ordinary people haven’t the slightest reason to doubt that things grow, or that thought causes action despite the mystery about how it occurs. By contrast, anyone aware of the basic ideas of contemporary science and the conspicuous lack of evidence of God have plenty of reason to doubt His existence. In such a case, mystery can be no refuge.

What's particularly odd about the belief about our supposed inability to know God's ways is that the inability is so arbitrarily and inexplicably strong: why should there be no normal evidence of his existence...? Why shouldn't it be possible to establish it in the same way as the existence of bacteria or the Big Bang? In any case, it's not as though the religious try to do what they might do in these other cases, namely, think of clever, indirect ways of finding out. No, the "mystery" is supposed to be "deeper" and far more impenetrable than that. I can't imagine what sustains such conviction—mind you, not merely about *God*, but about the *knowability of God's ways*—except perhaps an unconscious realization that there of course couldn't ever be serious evidence for something that doesn't actually exist.

3.10 Appeals to "faith": Of course, many religious people readily recognize the failure of evidence, but then go on to claim that religious beliefs are matters of "faith," not evidence (in an extreme case, like that of Tertullian or Kierkegaard, claiming to believe precisely "because it is absurd"). But try thinking something of the form:

p, however I don't have adequate evidence or reasons for believing it.

or

p, but it is totally absurd to believe it.

where you substitute for 'p' some non-religious claim, e.g. " $2+2=37$," "the number of stars is even," "Columbus sailed in 1962"... Imagine how baffling it would be to if someone claimed merely to "have faith" about these things. As Adler (1999) points out, there seems to be something "impossible," even "conceptually incoherent" about it, a little like the incoherence of thinking you know something, but being nevertheless convinced it isn't true...

[I]ssues of faith... arise precisely in those cases in which a person is asked to manifest their loyalty to a person or cause despite the evidence that might otherwise undermine it: thus, a father has faith in his son's honesty despite what the police say, or someone remains "true" to a political cause in the face of evidence of bribes... But, of course, cases of loyalty are precisely ones that lay the ground for the kind of self-deception that I have been arguing is characteristic of religious claims.

3.11 Betrayal by Reactions and Behavior: It is this aspect of religious claims on which John Stuart Mill fastened in the passage from *On Liberty* that I quoted at the start: Christians regularly avow belief in Jesus' teachings, about the blessedness of the poor, the difficulty of the rich entering heaven, and how everyone should love their neighbors, but it's perfectly obvious that relatively few of them seriously live in accordance with such precepts. Now, of course, such discrepancies could perhaps in some cases be explained away in the usual terms of "weakness of the flesh," "original sin," and the complexities of living in a capitalist, global economy. But, although I think Mill is essentially right, there's no reason to rest the case on the evidence he cites alone.

Consider most religious people's reactions and behavior at the death of a close friend or relative. Their usually quite intense grief and mourning do not seem seriously affected by the claimed prospects of a Hereafter (one wonders about the claimed exceptions). Pursuing the methodology of comparing the situation with a non-religious analog, contrast the reactions in two situations of a young, loving, "believing" couple who are each seriously ill: in the first, the wife has to be sent off to a luxurious convalescent hospital for care for two years before the husband can come and join her for an indefinite time thereafter. In the second, the wife is about to die, and the husband has been told he will follow in two years. If, in the second case, there really were the genuine belief in a heavenly hereafter that (let us suppose) they both avow, why shouldn't the husband feel as glad as in the first case—indeed, even gladder, given the prospect of eternal bliss! However, I bet he'd grieve and mourn "the loss" like anyone else. Indeed, note how most religious music for the dead is deeply lugubrious, and imagine the absurdity of performing the Mozart requiem for someone you won't see for a few years because she has gone to a luxurious resort! And why become so exercised about abortion and euthanasia, given the prospects of eternal bliss?

Or consider petitionary prayer (in contrast to a merely meditative sort): in the first place, the idea of an omni-god that would permit, e.g. children to die slowly of leukemia is already pretty puzzling. But to permit this to happen unless someone *prays* to Him to prevent it—this verges on a certain sort of sadism and moral incoherence (imagine a doctor who acted in this way!), and one wonders what people have in mind in worshipping Him...

Indeed, if petitionary prayer were a matter of serious belief, then why aren't those who engage in it disposed to have the National Institute of Health do a (non-intrusive) demographic study, say, of the different sorts of prayers, as they would were they interested in the claim whether soy beans prevent cancer? And why do none of them expect prayer to cure wooden legs? Or bring back Lazarus after two thousand years? I suggest that there are obvious limits to people's self-deception, and they know full well that God couldn't really intervene in such obviously impossible ways...

[F]or those who think that God will mete out justice for eternity in the hereafter, why are earthly prosecutions necessary? After all, imperfect humans are notoriously likely to go wrong both in gathering the relevant evidence about a crime, deciding on appropriate punishment, and interpreting God's laws in the first place. Why not just leave all these matters to an infinitely more perfect judge?

4. Are the Self-Deceptions of Religion Benign?

There seem to me a great many motivations for the self-deceptions of religion. As I've mentioned (and others have detailed), many of them seem purely sociological: loyalty to one's family, culture, tribe; maintaining public stances. Others may be more psychological: taking refuge in the consoling stories of one's childhood, giving expression to sensitivities that can be difficult to articulate regarding what's important about people and the world. Some of it may be due to desperate situations, as when recovering alcoholics rely on a "Higher Power," or when "everyone becomes a theist in a foxhole," or turns to religion in their lonely and miserable old age...

[Some instances of self-deception are quite innocuous. For example:] Someone recently quoted to me a statistic to the effect that the average philosophy article gets read maybe once. I'm not going to research this statistic more carefully. It helps that the facts here are unclear –continually muddled by local professional encouragements– so that I can pretty successfully sustain the thought that what I'm doing matters, which sufficiently motivates me to engage in the efforts, and, who knows?, maybe something will come of it (fortunately it's not the *only* reason I write the stuff). This is a benign self-deception that I'm happy to keep intact. Similar reasonings, of course, might apply to "turning a blind eye" to the faults of your friends and family, or to ignoring the signs of an in fact hopeless illness.

But there are limits. If my doing philosophy really required me to think of myself as the best philosopher since Kant, well, it'd be time to consider a new career. Some self-deceptions would be obviously demented. What I've tried to suggest in §§2-3 is that religious ones –at least abstracted from their social protections– seem to be of this sort...

My chief qualms about most religion, even as self-deception, are not, however, with regard to the rational absurdity of the claims, but to the use of those claims to buttress claims in other domains, specifically, ethics and psychology. Claims, for example, about which people God has "chosen," what He has promised them, whose side He favors in a war, and which sexual arrangements He approves, are somehow supposed to provide some special grounding to moral views, and have, of course, been enlisted to this effect on behalf of conquest, racism, slavery and persecution of sexual minorities. If you think some particular war is right, or some sexual practice wrong, fine; then provide your reasons for why you think so. But don't try to intimidate yourself and others with unsupportable, peculiarly medieval claims about how the "Lord of the Universe" approves or disapproves and will punish people accordingly...

But an equally serious qualm is the way religion often encourages too simple an understanding of ourselves. Some aspects of religious psychology are, of course immensely admirable: the Christian concern with a certain serious kind of respect and love, or *agape*, for all human beings, is, I think, on to something interesting and important in our emotional repertoire. And there's certainly much to be said for "faith, hope and charity," if they simply involve of the virtue of putting a good face on things, and hanging in there, for yourself and others, despite it all. But too much of traditional religion seems to be based on dangerously simplistic conceptions of human life and its troubles, leading people to see conflicts not in terms of the complex conflicting interests and situations of the different parties, but rather as a war between "good" and "evil," "virtue" and "sin," good guys and bad guys.¹¹ In any case, judging

¹¹ Plantinga (2000:207-8) goes so far as to claim that the doctrine of original sin...has been *verified* in the wars, cruelty and

from, e.g., the Crusades, the Inquisition, the wars of the Reformation and present days conflicts in Northern Ireland and the Middle East, it would appear that religious affiliation and these sorts of simplistic categories play as much a role in the horrors of the world as any of the standard “sins” (pride, avarice, adultery) *per se*. Reason enough, I should think, to be wary about religion as self-deception, not to mention as genuine belief.

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general hatefulness that have characterized human history from its very inception to the present” (p207, *italics mine*). (see also Alston 1991:268). But does Plantinga really think this is a serious historical hypothesis about the causes of all the world’s wars and the like? For one thing, these are often fought by people willing to *sacrifice themselves* for a “greater cause”; for another, weren’t people like Hitler and Stalin *paranoid* (or is that also “original sin”)? To be sure, the world has some nasty people in it; but it also has pretty complicated social and psychological problems, which are notoriously difficult to understand, for theist and atheist alike. It’s the temptation to disregard the complexities in these and other domains that strikes me as one of the most frightening risks of standard religious thinking.

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