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Meta-atheism:
Religious Avowal as Self-Deception¹

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1. Introduction

I'm not a professional philosopher of religion and have no special knowledge of theology. However, 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." Existence may or may not be a predicate, and there may or may not be unmoved movers, uncaused causers, and undesigned teleological systems, but these arguments don't remotely establish their intended conclusion, the existence of anything like the traditional Christian God with His astounding properties of, e.g., eternity, 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). And "religious experiences" or "intuitions" no matter how ecstatic or profound, could obviously be explained by any number of other far more modest hypotheses (I'll briefly discuss all these issues in §2 below). 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, obviously lots of people claim to, and seem to live and sometimes die for such beliefs. It's certainly risky for me to second-guess them on that score just because of some bad arguments --after all, don't people know what they themselves believe, and ordinarily 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. Indeed, my interest in the present topic stems in part from my interest in the quite general discrepancies that seem to me and others to arise between the things people sincerely say – or, as I shall say, "avow" – and what, according to objective evidence of their states and behavior, they actually believe.² For starters, note the formidable difficulties of expressing oneself clearly in language, of saying, and even consciously thinking,

exactly “what one means.” Related to that, there is the familiar phenomenon of adjusting what one says --and thinks-- in the light of the demands and expectations of one’s audience: here there are not only the enormously intricate issues regarding the pragmatics of speech, attention, humor, elegance, contextual saliency, but also simpler facts regarding verbal impulsiveness, pig-headedness, unnoticed empathy with one’s audience, and adjustments to what they do or don’t want to hear.³

But, in addition to these difficulties, there’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. There are the standard examples of 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 most of 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.

This is my hunch about what passes as “religious belief” (although I expect the other issues about self-ignorance, expression, and intended audience may also play a role). And so I find myself taking seriously the following hypothesis, which (for lack of a better name) I call meta-atheism:

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

Note that I am restricting the scope of the claim to members of my culture exposed to standard science. Although I expect it could be extended beyond them, I don’t want to speculate here on the psychology of people not so exposed.

Notice also 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. Pace the efforts of especially many recent philosophers to (as it were) mystify the topic, the 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 (this recourse to philosophy where common sense will suffice I call the “philosophy

fallacy,” which seems to me endemic to religious discussions). 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.

Some verbal issues: (i) I shall use “believe in God” as short for “believe that God exists,” ignoring as irrelevant for my purposes the differences between them; (ii) along lines of my (1988), I’m inclined to describe the result of self-deception as not genuine belief, but rather as things people merely sincerely “think” or “avow,” even when they don’t believe them. But nothing turns on this. I can well imagine someone regarding self-deceptive beliefs as genuine beliefs, and as simply manifesting ways in which people’s beliefs can be bizarrely irrational and compartmentalized. What concerns me is not the label, but the psychological structure: all I want to claim is that for most contemporary adults in our culture, there is some level at which they know very well the religious stories are false, even if they manage to get themselves to “believe”, avow, defend and even die for them on the surface. Moreover, there may be further levels at which they do also believe in God; it’s enough for my purposes that there is a significant level at which they believe it’s false, a level that, I will argue, is betrayed by a number of peculiarities of much ordinary religious thought that I will discuss in §3.

I want to emphasize that I am not intending what I say here to be critical of any religious practices (meditating, attending church), or to ridicule the kind of respect and reverence for people and things that often prompt the religious to resist a “materialism” that reduces the world to commodities and culture to facile gratifications. I am concerned only with the content of the supernatural claims they make on behalf of these practices and attitudes. The more seriously and carefully I think about these claims, the more utterly bizarre and unbelievable I find them. They seem, quite frankly, mad. At any rate, beliefs that there are invisible psychological agents, with larger than life powers, with whom one is some special “super-natural” communication, who love, scold, disapprove, command, forgive –think about it: these are the sorts of beliefs that, in any other, non-religious context, are associated with patently schizophrenic delusions!⁵

Now, of course, I don’t think that most religious people are schizophrenic. Nor do I think all religious people are being insincere: insincerity arises when someone says something, intending for it to be believed, that they consciously know full well they wouldn’t avow. Rather, the meta-atheism I want to defend is the view that many people who sincerely claim to believe in God are self-deceived, which, as some of the other cases I’ve already mentioned show, can be entirely “normal,” and even morally benign (see §4). My view is, of course, a kind of extension of the familiar observation that most religious stories involve patent wishful thinking and rehearsal of childhood dramas with one’s parents or social class. But I would also want to include other influences, for example, internal cognitive triggers, “deja vu,” “feelings of knowing,” loyalty to one’s family or other social groups, powerful commitments and identifications, or simple resistance to changing significant public stances.⁶

Another view from which I emphatically want to dissociate myself is the view that religious believers are ipso facto stupid, a view that is unfortunately suggested by (at least the

title of) the so-called “brights” movement of Richard Dawkins (2003a and b) and D.C. Dennett (2003). I am not claiming that religious claims are really based merely upon bad science or some common logical fallacies. To the contrary, I’m impressed by the fact that religious claims are manifestly insensitive to exposure of these fallacies in the standard arguments. It is the maintenance of the avowals despite an understanding of the errors that leads me to speculate that it must be due to self-deception.

Lastly, I should emphasize that I don’t mean to be the least smug or self-righteous about my hypothesis, or pretend to be less self-deceived than the next person. I’m convinced that self-deception and other discrepancies between our real and avowed attitudes are 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 mustn’t dwell on the fact for too long).⁷ But of course some cases may be more benign than others, an issue I’ll address in §4.

I don't pretend 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 am in a position to do, and, in any case, having a much clearer understanding of such really quite complex states and processes of “belief”, “avowal,” “self-deception” –and, indeed, of the mind generally– than I think anyone yet has.⁸ I fully expect that the right story in the area will allow for a wide variety of different sorts of “belief.” 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. Indeed, it’s really these peculiarities that interest me most.

2. ‘God’ and the Standard Justifications

2.1 God as a Mental Being

I should say right away roughly what I shall mean by ‘God.’ I’m most familiar with Christian conceptions, and in the short space here will focus upon them, although I expect much of what I say could be applied to others. What seems to me essential to most conceptions, and is what bothers atheists, is that God is a supernatural, psychological being, i.e., a being not subject to ordinary physical limitations, but capable of some or other mental state, such as knowing, caring, loving, disapproving.⁹ What the theist usually asserts that the atheist denies is that there is some such being who knows about our lives, cares about the good, either created the physical world or can intervene in it, and, at least in Christianity, is in charge of a person’s whereabouts in an “afterlife” (my talk of ‘God’ will sometimes be short for some cluster of these standard Christian claims). If you think of God as something other than a psychological being of this sort, or that talk of God is simply a metaphorical or “symbolic” way of talking about love, the possibility of goodness, or the Big Bang, then much of what I say may not apply (although such weakened construals are, of course, further evidence that people don’t really believe the literal theistic assertions).

Now, it doesn’t seem to me even a remotely serious possibility that such a God exists: his

non-existence is, in the words of the American jury system, “beyond a reasonable doubt.” I am, of course, well aware that plenty of arguments and appeals to experience have been produced to the contrary, but they seem to me obviously fallacious, and would be readily seen to be so were it not for the social protections religious claims regularly enjoy. For those who might be waylaid by some of the latest versions of the standard defenses, I will offer a few observations here, adding perhaps a usefully impatient perspective to the many arguments that others have more than adequately made elsewhere.¹⁰

2.2 Philosophy vs. Common Sense

It is crucial to my case for religion being self-deception that the reasons for atheism are obvious, not depending upon some subtle metaphysics, or sophisticated theories of knowledge (of which, if the truth be known, no remotely adequate examples are available anyway). The errors in the standard arguments for the existence of God are ones that can be easily appreciated by anyone with an average high-school education.¹¹

Not all metaphysical issues are obvious in this way. Indeed, it is important for issues beyond this debate to distinguish genuinely philosophical (or deeply theoretical) issues from relatively shallow empirical ones that can be settled by straightforward observation or commonsense reflection. The existence of universals, the nature of intentionality and meaning, the justification of induction and claims about the external world taken as a whole: these are notoriously difficult issues to sort out, involving often quite abstract, subtle and sophisticated reflection. But some disputes don't involve anything of the sort. Arguments about the existence of ghosts, gremlins or evil spirits are simply not worth any serious philosophical or theoretical attention. The straightforward reason not to believe in these things is simply that there is no serious evidence for them. If someone thinks there is, then they need to produce the evidence. Merely citing the spooky feeling you get in your attic, or the baleful stare of the village madman isn't enough.

I submit that claims about God are of this latter sort. There's simply no reason to take them more seriously than one does claims about witches or ghosts. The idea that one needs powerful philosophical theories to settle such issues might be called the “philosophy fallacy.” We will see that people are particularly prey to it in religious discussions, both theist and atheist alike; indeed, atheists often get trapped into doing far more, far riskier philosophy than they need.¹²

Thus, I'm emphatically not aiming to criticize the theist on particularly philosophical grounds. For example, I make no presumption of having a serious theory of knowledge, or a reply to the global sceptic, arguing against theism on the basis of a theory that would support the possibility of ordinary empirical knowledge. I am taking ordinary empirical knowledge entirely for granted –as most people, including theists do– and am simply arguing that theism is obviously unwarranted by the standards of that knowledge, in a way that should be obvious to anyone not biased by prior religious commitments.

2.3 Atheism and the Absence of Evidence

A standard reason often provided for atheism is “the argument from the existence of evil,” which certainly should (and regularly does) give the Believer "pause. But that really is just an instance of a more general argument from failed explanation: 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. Evil in the case of God is just a special case: 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. 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.¹³

There are two sorts of replies theists have made to this argument: theoretical appeals, and appeals to special, religious experience. A few remarks about each.

2.4 The Standard Theoretical Arguments

Apart from the standard errors and fallacies, the simplest thing to notice about most of the traditional theoretical arguments for God is that they don't establish the existence of a psychological being of any sort: after all, why should a necessary, even “perfect” being, or an unmoved mover, uncaused causer, or unexplained explainer, have a mind any more than a it might have a liver or a gall bladder, much less have or be a unique one with the hyperbolic properties in question? It's true that we ordinarily take for granted the operations of mind, and so often rest content with an explanation of something that ends with some appeal to what someone wanted or intended. But even someone who thinks that intentional (or “agent”) causation is rock-bottom can wonder why the agent had that intention, and why they acted on it. Even a serious theist could wonder what on earth God had in mind in creating the world when and as He did (had he had a bad night?), and so why that particular mental being would suffice as an unexplained explainer.

The one argument that does involve a mind is, of course, the argument from design, but I presume it can't be taken seriously since Darwin (or really since Hume, who also pointed to the innumerable competing hypotheses that were compatible with the evidence).¹⁴ “Watchmaker” analogies, like that of Paley (19??) —as well as more recent arguments from the “improbability” of the universe having the constants it has— are quite generally inapt, since, conspicuously unlike the case of a watchmaker, no one has the slightest evidence of God's intentions (and/or the real probabilities of our universe existing) apart from the universe itself, and so it risks patently circularity to claim that his intentions explain the way the universe is.¹⁵

2.5 Religious Experience

It's a commonplace that few people really base their claims about God on these traditional arguments, but rather appeal to special experiences and intuitions (I won't

distinguish). Standard Christian reports of religious experiences speak about sensing the “presence” of God or Christ as disembodied spirits, accompanied by overwhelming feelings of “goodness” and “love” (see Alston 1991:12ff). Now, there seems to be some evidence that many people who claim to have such experiences really are in an idiosyncratic state (see McKay (in press)). But, on the face of it, however distinctive the experiences, it’s perfectly obvious that they themselves can’t establish much of anything beyond themselves, any more than dreams of ghosts do: what would need to be shown is that God --or ghosts-- would be the best explanation of those experiences; but this no one has even seriously begun to do.

It bears stressing that evaluating any claim based upon experiential intuition requires taking some measure of what might be called the “epistemic distance” between the intuition and the claim it is supposed to establish, e.g., the probability of the claim’s being true given the intuition. Epistemic distance obviously varies enormously with different claims. The epistemic distance between someone’s having an experience with a certain character and it having that character is pretty small, and so we may take reports of the religious experiences themselves pretty much at face value (although there might be room for doubt about how the subjects are characterizing it: is it, e.g., really goodness and love they feel?). The distance with claims about material objects is a little greater, but supported in innumerable ways by independent evidence. With claims about ghosts, the distance is of course a great deal larger, but perhaps still locally manageable: if we really had some independent evidence of them, were able to rule out competing hypotheses about people’s purported experiences, then we should certainly have some interesting *prima facie* reason to take the claims seriously.

But, now compare these cases with the staggering epistemic distance in the case of claims about God. How possibly could local, personal experiences provide serious evidence for the existence of a necessary, eternal, omni-being responsible for the creation of the world? Eternality is a long time, and necessity and omni-properties are modal properties not established by mere experience alone (how could any a finite number of experiences alone establish that a being was there forever, in all possible worlds, capable of knowing and doing every possible thing?); and claims about creation would have at least to be corroborated by other evidence. It would probably also be a good idea to run some controlled experiments on these experiences to rule out the effects of, e.g., lively and hyperbolic imaginations, wishful thinking, and, of course, the massive social indoctrination imposed on everyone in our culture since earliest childhood. These are tall orders, patently not satisfied by isolated experiences alone. This is where the traditional theoretical arguments would have to take over, fallacies and all.

Note that attention to epistemic distance is not a demand that needs to be satisfied in the actual formation of beliefs. It’s a demand for reflection. Alvin Plantinga (2000:105,175, 370) reasonably claims that many of our ordinary beliefs based on memory and perception are not arrived at by (conscious) reasoning, e.g., to a best explanation of one’s experience, but are “triggered” or “occasioned” by experience.¹⁶ For example, I arguably don’t infer from certain sensations that I remember seeing a cat last week; I just remember seeing a cat. Whether or not I arrived at this belief by a “justified” route, I am “warranted” in believing I saw a cat insofar as my eyes and memory are reliable. Plantinga then proceeds to claim that human beings are

endowed with a special faculty, a “sensus divinitatus,” which doesn’t provide so much a rational basis for religious belief, but a means by which such belief “is triggered or occasioned by a wide variety of circumstances, including ...the marvelous, impressive beauty of the night sky; the timeless crash and roar of the surf that resonates deep within us; the majestic grandeur of the mountains...,” not to mention “awareness of guilt” (2000:174-5). He then points out that whether this belief is warranted in this way depends, as in the case of a memory of a cat, upon whether the faculty is reliable, which depends, then, on whether God exists: “a successful atheological objection will have to be to the truth of theism, not to its rationality, justification... or whatever” (2000:191). But this latter is a false dilemma. The question the “atheologist” is raising is not whether theistic beliefs are formed by some process of justification, but whether, on reflection, there is any independent reason to think that extravagant beliefs occasioned by mountain peaks and free-floating guilt were in fact caused by (the reliable operation of a sensus divinitas detecting) God. Of course there isn’t, any more there’s any reason to think that beliefs about ghosts “occasioned” by misty graveyards and decrepit old houses are caused by real ghosts (much less through the operation of a “sensus spiritatus”). And that’s partly because there’s no reason to think that ghosts or God exists.

2.6 Sceptical Worries and the Philosophy Fallacy

At this point, many theists are fond of claiming that this sort of demand for independent evidence for a religious faculty of knowledge is illegitimate, mounting a *tu quoque*, along the lines of traditional scepticism, to the effect that there is no independent evidence for memory and sensory perception either (see e.g. Alston 1993:chap 3, Plantinga 2000:119). After all, any test would seem to presuppose at least some reliability of those very faculties. They conclude that we have to rely on “basic beliefs,” which, for some people, may perfectly well include a belief in God.

Such a move seems to me a parade case of the “philosophy fallacy” I mentioned earlier. The question of how we manage to know anything (about anything: logic, mathematics, or the external world) is a terrifically hard one, and mounting a reply to the traditional sceptic is perhaps even harder. But it’s a serious mistake to suppose that discussions about theism really wait on these difficult issues, any more than does a reasonable verdict in court, or a dismissal of claims about ghosts. As G.E. Moore (19??) observed, it’s a requirement on any credible theory of knowledge that it not deny that normal people know such ordinary things as that they have two hands. A corollary of that observation is that it should also not tolerate the delusions of schizophrenics. Quite apart from answering the sceptic, any theory of knowledge that would successfully include knowledge of a god would need to present a theory that meets both of these demands, and it is difficult to see how it could do so, whether or not it’s “naturalist,” “foundationalist,” coherentist or reformed. In particular, Plantinga’s claim that the “warrant” of theism can be defended by appeal to a *sensus divinitatus* would have to be shown not to be thereby tolerating analogous appeals of (a community of) schizophrenics.¹⁷ The question is not whether there are or aren’t “basic” or foundational beliefs, but why on earth anyone should think that belief in the existence of anything with the extravagant implications of God should figure

among them; or, even if it does, why the utter failure of any of these implications to be independently confirmed wouldn't be an overwhelming reason to scotch the belief, basic or otherwise. Beliefs acquired by unassisted vision, be they ever so basic, are soon undermined by noticing you're not seeing things smack in front of you –or are “seeing” things for which there's no independent evidence. You don't need an answer to the philosophical sceptic to know that!

Whatever one may think of the ultimate philosophical significance of Quine's (1968??) “naturalized epistemology,” he was surely right in noting that, at least as things presently stand, the ordinary practice of justification consists in strengthening evidential relations among the vast network of interlocking beliefs we have about the world: beliefs based on memory are confirmed by the evidence of sight, sound, feel and the testimony of others, which in turn receive confirmation from that of still others, and so forth. Indeed, as Adler (1999) nicely emphasizes, this confirmation increases minute by minute, as ever new, usually utterly trivial testimony or sensory evidence further confirms standing beliefs: what people say to me today usually (although not always) jibes with what I believe they and many others said yesterday, as well as with what I observe and remember myself, and so gives me further reason to maintain most of my old beliefs. Perhaps the whole network (or, anyway, a great deal of it) could be an elaborate hoax of an evil demon. But circles get less vicious as they get bigger, and include things you haven't the slightest reason to abandon. Even if there is no non-circular justification for induction and sensory perception, at least the circle involves pretty much the totality of one's beliefs, many of which (as Moore also emphasized) we have far more to reason to trust than we do any of the arguments of the philosophical sceptic. Moreover, it's crucial to note in the debate about God, these beliefs are shared by theist and atheist alike. By comparison, the circle of religious beliefs is viciously small, and involves hosts of claims that the atheist has raised substantial reasons to doubt. The theistic claims just dangle, at best compatible with the rest of our network, but not in the least confirmed by it.¹⁸

The thesis I want to defend in the rest of this paper is that most everyone knows all of this: the contemporary theist's disregard of such obvious standards is simply the result of a variously motivated self-deception, to which I now turn.

3. Reasons for Meta-Atheism

There seem to me to be roughly the following eleven reasons to doubt the avowed theism of at least anyone subjected to a standard Anglo-European high school education (some of them overlap):

3.1 Obviousness of the Considerations raised in §2: I submit that the kinds of considerations I raised in the previous section are ones to which any moderately educated adult is readily sensitive.¹⁹ Perhaps non-philosophers wouldn't bother to put it the ways I have, and doubtless most people have not really even thought very much about the standard theological arguments (so a fortiori they haven't based their beliefs upon them). But 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. Imagine a jury hearing testimony by a defendant appealing to a *sensus spiritatus* on behalf of a claim that "a ghost did it": is it really in the cards that they would take it seriously "beyond a reasonable doubt"?

3.2 Blatant Sophistry of Religious Arguments: As regards the 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 (the perfect island, the perfect demon). 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.²⁰ Unless one came to the arguments with a preconceived theism, few would conclude from the fact that everything had a cause that there was a single cause for everything --much less that that cause had a mind. And I haven't the slightest doubt that were Plantinga to hear a psychotic appeal to a *sensus martianus* on behalf of his beliefs that he was controlled by Martians, he wouldn't take it seriously for a moment.

3.3 Tolerance of Otherwise Delusional Claims: I don't think you need to be an atheist to have the reaction I've mentioned to the content of religious claims. I submit that, 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 psychotic. Think, for instance, 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 various cults, in which some charismatic figure convinces people that he is the voice of God and that they should renounce their worldly lives and follow him in various peculiar practices (think of the Koresh cult in Texas, or the recent "Heaven's Gate" cult surrounding the Hale-Bopp comet) --and then remember that many religions, notably Christianity, were themselves once just such "cults" (see Pagels 19??). Or, to pass on to related doctrines, think about what you would make

of someone –again in any other context– who said they could really change wine into blood, or bread into flesh, or who thought that some kind of justice or other good would be realized by having a perfectly innocent person die for the sins of everyone else (imagine a judge in a local court deciding that, because he so loves the guilty defendant, he will conceive and sacrifice a son to atone for the crimes!). In any non-religious context, such proposals would, I submit, be regarded as sheer lunacy.²¹

A caveat: as Chris Bernard (2001) has emphasized to me, many people who should know better are prey to “superstitions”: knocking on wood after boasting, wearing the socks one wore in hitting the home run, worrying about the next air flight because one has flown so many times so far without accident. At least for many of us, what’s peculiar about these “beliefs” is that they persist at some level despite our seriously disavowing them –and despite their failure to be integrated into the rest of our thought. They might be called “ossified beliefs”: thin, isolated beliefs that have become rigid and aren’t removed by rational reflection. Other examples (if otherwise correct) might be the “neurotic” beliefs Freudians ascribe to us on the basis of irrational behavior –e.g. regarding murderous fathers and castrating mothers. I wouldn’t be surprised if some religious beliefs are also of this ossified sort (when theists suspect atheists are themselves self-deceptive about their atheism, it may well be such ossified beliefs they have in mind). Of course, many religions are at pains to distinguish belief in God from “mere superstition.” Religious belief becomes self-deceptive, on my view, when the belief is not merely noted, in the detached way that one notes one’s superstitions, but wholly endorsed, regarding it as somehow something more than mere superstition. It’s this further attempt to integrate religious beliefs into, as it were, serious belief that strikes me, for the reasons I have given, as going against what most people with a high school education know very well to be true.

3.4 Reliance on Texts: 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, whose claims are presented dogmatically (indeed, the primary meaning of ‘dogma’ has precisely to do with religious proclamations). The texts standardly serve as the sole basis for various claims 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, of course, raises countless theoretical and practical problems, familiar from the history of religious strife. Most obviously: how do you know which text, translation, or interpretation to trust? Why believe one of them was and another was not “the word of God”? It is common knowledge that the Bible we possess is at least in part the result of the efforts of a great many ordinary mortals, as susceptible to “sin” as anyone, working in very different languages, different times and conditions, embroiled in now this, now that religious controversy.²² One would think it would behoove someone worried about which version really did reflect 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 (cf. the regress of “faith” we noted in fn.18). However, so far as I know, serious biblical scholarship has little effect on people’s actual religious practices.

This all contrasts dramatically with science and common-sense, where there are patently no such sacred texts or creeds. Of course, there are textbooks, but these are quite frequently challenged, revised and “updated” as the result of further research (Newton’s classic Principia is seldom read outside of historical research). In general, we know very well that truths about the world are not revealed per se by the contents of some text. Indeed, as recent science shows, there is no claim so sacrosanct that some good scientist --or scientifically minded philosopher-- might not reasonably challenge it. In terms of Quine’s (1960) famous metaphor of “Neurath’s boat,” in both science and commonsense we are like mariners on the open sea who have to repair their boat while remaining afloat in it, standing now on one plank to repair a second, a second to repair a third, only to stand on the third to repair the first.²³

3.5 Detail Resistance: This continual revision and mutual adjustment of ordinary beliefs is related to the multifarious ways we noted earlier (§2.4) that 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 the O.J. juries 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 blue-prints 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? At what specific point does He --could He possibly-- intervene in the natural course of events without causing utter havoc? 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 (imagine there being careful investigation of radio-isotopes, sedimentary layers and the fossil record to establish precisely how, when and where God created atoms and compounds, as well as the full array of biological species).

Of course, theologians do discuss details. Again, I'm not a scholar of theology, however, I'm willing to wager that few of the details they discuss are of the evidential sort that we ordinarily expect of ordinary claims about the world, i.e. claims that link the theological to crucial data that would be better explained by the theological than by any competing hypothesis. Elaborations of the theological stories without this property –mere stories about “angels on the head of a pin”– don't constitute such details. As I mentioned earlier, they dangle without the least confirmation from the rest of our worldly claims. If there really are serious attempts to narrow down the details of God's activities by, e.g., reference to the fossil record, or systematic studies of the effects of prayer, then I stand corrected. But I'd also wager that most “believers” would find such efforts silly, perhaps even “sacrilegious.”

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 the religious, 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 Dorothy and Toto make it to Oz? These questions are obviously silly and have no real answers –the text pretty much exhausts what can be said about the issues. So, 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.

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 I need to suspend a good deal of my ordinary reactions. 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 sacrifice (again, imagine hearing of a local judge who arranged for such a thing).

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 yourself a judge in a court, considering an appropriate punishment for the sins of man, and ask yourself whether the crucifixion of Jesus would be even remotely appropriate. In the first place, as I mentioned, the idea of an innocent person being sacrificed to expiate someone else’s sins is really pretty wild. But, secondly, supposing that this kind of proxy atonement did make sense, the question should certainly arise in the specific case of Jesus whether He actually did suffer enough! I don’t mean to say that His betrayal and crucifixion weren’t pretty awful; but can they really “balance” all the “sins” of Ghenghis Kahn, 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 Egregiously 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; see §2.3 above) 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. They know very well that most of the universe consists of immense tracts of empty space, dotted with horrendous explosions and careening rubble, amidst most of which living things couldn’t survive for an instant. Even sticking to the minuscule earth, they know that a biological war of all against all likely leaves most animals starving, diseased and scared; and that people’s lives standardly end in humiliating disease and deterioration that often renders them unable to recognize family and friends, much less retain any wisdom they may have gained. (Can someone really think with a straight face that Alzheimer’s helps in the building of stronger,

immortal soul?) Of course, it's perfectly fine to be selective about what one dwells upon and enjoys; it's self-deception only if it leads one to avow hypotheses that you know to be belied by overwhelming evidence.

Or consider the appalling cultural bias of especially (but not only) Christian views. Until the colonization of the rest of the world by Europe beginning in the Sixteenth Century, most of the world hadn't heard a thing about the Judeo-Christian omni-God –and presumably prior to around 2000BC virtually no one had (perhaps there'd been a few seers). These non-Europeans and earlier peoples worshipped a multitude of very different sorts of divinities, if any at all, and, of course, a great many of them still do. This should be a most peculiar and extraordinary fact with regard to an omni-being who created the world and remains significantly in charge of it, particularly one keen that people “don't worship any gods before Him” --a little like learning that the vast majority of Romans hadn't the faintest idea about their proud and powerful emperor, and took themselves to ruled by other figures entirely. Why does the “word of god” not even mention all these other people? What are Christians to make of them?

A standard story seems to be that all humans are tainted with “original sin” that makes them “blind” to God and his commands. For example, Alston (who, to his credit, is quite worried by this problem) writes:

It may be that God makes basic truths about Himself readily available to all persons, regardless of race, creed or color, but many of us are too preoccupied with other matters to take sufficient notice. This angle on the matter has been stressed in the Christian tradition under the rubric of “original sin,” and it provides another alternative to supposing that persistent disagreement can best be explained by a total lack of genuine cognition. –(Alston 1991:268)

The emperor is deciding the eternal fate of billions of people and they are all are “too preoccupied” to notice?! Well, according to Plantinga (2000):

sin carries with it a sort of blindness, a sort of imperceptiveness, dullness and stupidity... I [the sinner] am inclined to seek my own personal glorification and aggrandizement, bending all my efforts toward making myself look good.

--(pp207-8)

Indeed:

Were it not for sin and its effects, God's presence and glory would be as obvious and uncontroversial to us all as the presence of other minds, physical objects and the past. –(p214)

Now perhaps Alston, Plantinga and other Christians may believe this sort of thing about many of their secular compatriots (although really!). But they and other Christians know very well they're in no position to insist upon it with regard to the billions upon billions of, e.g., Chinese, Indians, Polynesians, Native Americans, past and present, who didn't and don't have the good

fortune to be visited by missionaries, evangelicals, or conquistadores. At any rate, I hope Christians don't seriously think that all of these peoples were and are so "dull, stupid and self-aggrandizing" as to be "blind" to the presence of something "as obvious as physical objects"! There may be other, more plausible stories that other Christians tell here –I believe George Bush once claimed "we all really believe in the same God"– but, whatever the story, it's hard to see how anyone could take themselves to be in a position to seriously believe it. Everyone knows perfectly well that they don't know nearly enough about such distant peoples. Of course, typical Christians don't consciously focus on such matters --and so consciously avow things that they know full well to be problematic.

3.9 Appeals to Mystery: Confronted with many of the above problems, many theists claim God is a "mystery" --indeed, I once heard a famous convert, Malcolm Muggeridge, claim "mystery" as his main reason for believing! 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! Just so: if it's really a complete mystery how God designed or created the world 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.

It is often claimed that believers are 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 claims about His omni-properties, as well as, crucially, what He likes and dislikes. 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 (cf. fn. 18 above)? Why shouldn't it be establishable 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": Indeed, most 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 Kirkegaard, 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 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.

Now, the issues surrounding how "voluntary" belief can be are quite difficult (see Alston 1991:73), although, interestingly for the present discussion, probably more manageable with regard to conscious avowals than to genuine belief. But the point here is that there's something obviously odd about the way the issue arises with religion. As my colleague, Christopher Morris, put it to me:

Many religious people have stressed that religious belief requires a struggle against doubt. This is why faith is a virtue (for Christians); it helps them resist a temptation. (Temptation? Justified true belief?!) This fact seems to be an admission that the evidence is not persuasive, even if it is in other ways conclusive or determinative. It's odd to have a special virtue for religious matters, as if the usual virtues regarding belief don't suffice. [pc]

On the other hand, issues of faith do 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. Indeed, I suspect one reason for the odd removal of many religious beliefs from empirical (dis-)confirmation may be due to the useful role of "unfalsifiable" claims in keeping a group together. Groups aligned around political or social causes, for example, are forever de-stabilized by people discovering evidence that undermines some specific claim on which the cause may have been based (people didn't benefit from "trickle down" effects; Stalin really did do horrific things) –although, they, too, notoriously struggle to keep people to a "party line," which often comes to look "religious" in its rigidity. --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: Most people's reactions and behavior --for example, grief, mourning at a friend's death-- do not seem seriously affected by the claimed prospects of a Hereafter (one wonders about the claimed exceptions). 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 afterlife 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 (note how most religious music for the dead is deeply lugubrious, and imagine the absurdity of performing a requiem mass on behalf of someone you won't see for a few years because she has gone to a luxurious resort!).

Or consider petitionary prayer: why aren't people who believe in it disposed to have the National Institute of Health do a controlled study (say, of the different sorts of prayer) as they would were they interested in the claim whether soy beans cure cancer?²⁴ And, in any case, 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 that preposterous a way.

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; taking refuge in the consoling stories of one's childhood, etc. Some of it may simply be due to "ossified" superstitions, or uncontrolled responses to overwhelming personal experiences. 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." But a few of them are philosophical, and deserve to be addressed here.

One thing many people find satisfying is being a part of some emotionally fulfilling project they endorse that goes beyond their own individual lives: the good of the family, the community, the tribe, the nation, art, knowledge, etc. At any rate, people pretty regularly find depressing the thought that their labors, especially their sufferings, are "meaningless," in that they don't contribute to some larger good. And it can be gratifying (but by no means required) that these projects are effectively nested: one slaves away, say, as the cook on an expedition to discover a fossil, which contributes to geology, which contributes to knowledge, which (perhaps) contributes to human welfare. Insofar as someone might look for still further nestings of one's projects, wondering, perhaps, what's so important about human welfare, it apparently can be gratifying to be told there is some still larger project, perhaps a largest conceivable project, of

which humanity is an integral part (“For the glory of God and that my neighbor may benefit thereby,” Bach inscribed on his ms.s). This last, hyperbolic move seems to be one of the appeals of religion, and, I presume, explains why many people think of a life without God as “meaningless.”

It seems to me there are two responses one can have to this familiar fact. The first is to notice that the appeal to some “largest possible” project is really only a temporary palliative. At any rate, if one really doesn’t find some very large project, such as art, knowledge or human welfare, somehow gratifying in itself, it is difficult to see how just increasing the project’s community to include super-human gods should be of any help. Why shouldn’t one wonder and be depressed about the meaninglessness of these projects as well –indeed, if it were the largest possible project, then it would metaphysically impossible for it to have any meaning beyond itself!²⁵ (And would it help to be eternal? If you’re bothered by something not being meaningful over a finite time, it’s hard to see why you should be consoled by learning that it will continue forever: eternal pointlessness might well be worse than death!)

Just so, the depressives among us might observe. But while we might, by the above consideration, be condemned to necessary meaninglessness, there’s nothing logically mandated by depression itself. Being depressed is not the conclusion of any argument; failing to be depressed even by the worst news in the world isn’t irrational. At any rate, it is perfectly open to someone persuaded of the ultimate meaninglessness of life to find this a fact of profound indifference.

Of course, most human beings are so constituted that they do in fact get depressed by certain sorts of things, notably the pointlessness of their projects, and especially by the suffering and death of themselves and their friends. With regard to these latter, I’m afraid I have nothing more helpful to say than anyone else --including the theist. Philosophers have, I think, rightly pointed out that death may not be as bad as people suppose, but it’s hard to think of any story –least of all the glory of God!– that would justify the sufferings of, for example, children dying from plague, cancer, or AIDS, or people wasting away with Alzheimer’s or completely debilitating strokes.

With regard to our projects, however, there does seem to be a good deal of plasticity. At least the economically fortunate can usually focus their attention on one group or project rather than another. Most of life, after all, is a pretty local affair, seldom requiring attention to all one’s concerns, least of all to the “big” questions. Frustration with family can be replaced by (again, at least for the lucky) satisfaction with work, or maybe with just hanging out and schmoozing with friends. If the ultimate meaninglessness of it all is really bothering you, bear in mind that you are not rationally obliged to dwell on it, any more than you are rationally obliged to dwell on the dreariness of the weather, much less be perpetually upset by it.

Perhaps this is where a little self-deception, though, may be in order. Thinking your efforts are worthwhile for some larger project you approve is probably necessary to get your heart into those efforts. But –and here I tread with caution for fear of disrupting my own heart– serious reflection might well lead you to find such a thought pathetic. 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 (but 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, involving, I daresay, claims far more grandiose than my being the best since Kant. Pace James (1897/20??), these sorts of claims are well beyond any evidential ambiguity, and so seem far beyond the pale of benign self-deception or other “pragmatic” reasoning.

However, my chief qualms about most religion, even as self-deception, are not 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, bizarrely medieval claims about how the “Lord of the Universe” approves or disapproves and will punish people accordingly. What, after all, does His disapproval have to do with morality in the first place? It’s by no means obvious that even creators of a world get to say what’s supposed to go on in it.

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 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.²⁶ In any case, judging 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 a far larger role in the horrors of the world than 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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