

Georges Rey, Philosophy, Univ of Maryland, College Park 20742; georey@earthlink.net

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*Meta-atheism:  
Religious Avowal as Self-Deception  
(Long Version)*<sup>1</sup>

## 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, clearly lots of people claim to, and seem to live and sometimes die for their religious

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1. This is a steadily expanding version of Rey (2006), which is a long version of Rey (2007), both of which are expanded versions of Rey (2001). On the advice of a number of readers, I've retained its somewhat breezy style, which I hope will make the paper accessible to more than the usual professional audience.

I should also mention that the impetus to the central idea for all these papers arose from some stray remarks some years ago of Rogers Albritton, Ted Kompanetz and Hilary Putnam, although I doubt they would recognize, much less endorse what I have made of them. I'm also grateful to Jonathan Adler, Louise Antony, Chris Bernard, Boran Beric, Sally Bogacz, Lisa Leigh, Joe Levine, Ray Martin, Chris Morris, Ryan McKay, Jeremiah Riemer and Michael Slote for useful discussions and comments; and to Antony, Martin and Daniel Kolak for the encouragement to write up my views and their permission to reproduce the result in the various forms.

views.<sup>2</sup> 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. 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 avow, and what, according to objective evidence of their states and behavior, they actually believe.<sup>3</sup> 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 intricate issues regarding how we efficiently use language in conversation (e.g. limiting the "context," taking for granted background knowledge), but also simpler problems of impulsiveness, pig-headedness, unnoticed empathy with one's audience, and adjustments to what they do or don't want to hear.

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. Simple examples are the standard one 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. But some cases are more systematic and "ideological." For example, people frequently espouse claims about universal freedom, rights or justice that they often blatantly ignore in their own (or their party's) activities, as in the case of many well-intentioned communists disregarding the horrors of Stalin, or defenders of American foreign policy tolerating the death-squads in Latin America. Some of this is, of course, simply lies and hypocrisy; but I bet some of it is perfectly sincere self-deception. 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 particularly along the latter ideological lines (although I suspect the other issues about expression and

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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.

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, 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.**

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. My view is, of course, a kind of extension of the usual claims about wishful thinking and rehearsal of childhood and other social dramas that one finds in, e.g., Marx and Freud. But I would also want to include other influences, for example, loyalty to one's family or other social groups, powerful commitments and identifications, or simple resistance to changing significant public stances.<sup>4</sup>

Lest the reader think my view merely a peculiar pet idea of my own, it's worth noting what Joseph Levine recently called to my attention, 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:

To what an extent doctrines intrinsically fitted to make the deepest impression upon the mind may remain in it as dead beliefs, without being ever realized in the imagination, the feelings, or the understanding, is exemplified by the manner in which the majority of believers hold the doctrines of Christianity. 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. The standard to which he does refer it, is the custom of his nation, his class, or his religious profession. ... 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 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

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4. Another source that there is not space to discuss here are various innate cognitive mechanisms discussed in rich detail by Boyer (2001, 2004) and Atran (2002). I've been surprised to find philosophers (e.g. Quinn 1985, Taliaferro 1998:286, Plantinga 2000:chaps 5,11) pretty much confining the atheistic explanations of religious claims to the grand, but not very well confirmed speculations of Nietzsche, Marx, Durkheim and Freud. Although I think there is certainly something to what each of those authors say, atheists can surely avail themselves of less ambitious hypotheses, such as ones suggested by Boyer and Atran.here.

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, and perhaps there are special features that attach to them (I'll return to Mill's passage below). 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.<sup>5</sup> 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

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5. 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.

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 may 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 manifested in a number of peculiarities of much ordinary religious thought that I will discuss in §3.

Note that I’m not at all concerned to criticize religious *practices* --meditating, keeping a sabbath, attending church, engaging in rituals surrounding birth, marriage and death. I am certainly not unsympathetic to religious resistance to the crass “materialism” and commerciality of much contemporary life, nor even opposed to some sense of what people call the “spiritual,” understood as a certain respectful feeling towards the world and other people, and a valuing of their less superficial properties. I am concerned only with the content of the *supernatural claims* that are made 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 infinitely great powers, with whom one is some special “super-natural” communication, who love, scold, disapprove, command, forgive –whatever else one may think about the legitimacy of religion, surely one has to acknowledge that these are the *sorts of claims* that, in any other, non-religious context, are associated with patently psychotic delusions!<sup>6</sup>

Now, of course, I don’t think for a moment that most religious people are psychotic. 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* (if they were being “truthful”). 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 involves a discrepancy not between what they *say* and what they *avow*, but between what they *avow* and what they genuinely *believe*, and which, as some of the other cases I’ve already mentioned show, can be entirely “normal,” and even morally benign (see §4).

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 (although I’ll discuss these briefly in §2). 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.

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6. This is not merely a superficial impression: Psychiatrists Saver and Rabin (1997) and Jackson (1997) despair of making diagnostic distinctions between the content of culturally sanctioned religious beliefs and that of religious delusions (I am indebted here to Ryan McKay –see his (in press) for a useful review and discussion of the burgeoning research in this regard).

One reason my view may seem initially absurd is that religious claims are so intensely familiar that we tend not to hear how truly bizarre and unbelievable they are. They can cast a kind of spell on us --they certainly did on me when I was young-- and we can easily mouth the words, even meaningfully, without really attending to what they literally mean. For this reason, in trying to make my case for meta-atheism, I will want to distance myself a little from the claims, and, in order to bring out what I find bizarre in them, will sometimes use harsh language (e.g., “psychotic delusion”) that may already have offended religious readers (some of whom are friends!). I ask them to bear with it. It’s really not intended to be insulting. May it simply provide the occasion for the religious to say precisely why such language is unwarranted and where I’ve gone wrong.

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).<sup>7</sup> 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, 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.<sup>8</sup> 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. I’ll set out these peculiarities shortly. Indeed, it’s really they, more than the conclusion itself, that interest me.

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7. It would not be incompatible with my claims here that I myself might turn out to be self-deceived about my own atheism (and meta-atheism!), and that somewhere in some recess of my psychology I’m as devout (and as much a believer in believers) as anyone --perhaps explaining why I worship Bach. My point would remain that there’s still a level at which I nevertheless know better.

8. Despite our occasional perspicacity about ourselves and others, I join many recent philosophers and psychologists in thinking we tend to exaggerate our degree of self-knowledge. Our position seems to me rather like that of modern children in relation to computers, on which they are able to play elaborate games, but of whose structure they are largely ignorant; see Nisbett and Wilson (1977), Wilson (2002), Moran (2001) and Rey (1988, 1997:32-4,187-9, and 2003) for further discussion. Boyer (1994, 2001) also notes discrepancies between what the religious claim and how they actually behave, assimilating it to the lack of conscious access manifest in many areas of cognitive science, e.g., to the principles of one’s grammar.

## 2. 'God' and the Standard Justifications

### 2.1 God as a Mental Being

I should say 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 at issue with 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. 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, far "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 been more than adequately made elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>

### 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. I submit that, once one abstracts away from the powerful motivations of religious commitment, the errors in the standard versions of the arguments for the existence of God are ones that can be easily appreciated by anyone with an average high-school education.

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

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9. See most any introductory philosophy text, e.g. Sober (2004:pt II) for a good discussion of the standard arguments. In what follows, I'll focus more on the theistic arguments of recent "reformed epistemologists," William Alston (1991) and Alvin Plantinga (2000), since they are a bit more sophisticated than many of the standard ones, and are likely to be on the minds of contemporary readers.

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 I like to call 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.

### **2.3 Atheism and the Absence of Evidence**

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 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.<sup>10</sup>

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).<sup>11</sup> "Watchmaker" analogies, like that of Paley—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.<sup>12</sup>

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10. 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.

11. Plantinga (1993) actually argues that evolution is self-defeating, depriving us of any reason for thinking that our cognitive faculties tend to find the truth (as opposed to making us fit). But, as Fodor (1998) rightly pointed out, the argument depends upon a crude selectionism that serious Darwinians needn't and don't endorse, and the fact that no one has a serious clue about the relation of our cognitive faculties (whatever *they* in fact are) to whatever did get selected.

12. Someone might argue that the concept of God does provide us knowledge of his necessarily good intentions. And, to be sure, it would count as evidence of such a benevolent designer if, in cases not involving human intervention, justice really *always* did win out, and the world were on balance a morally terrific place. So, *pace* Logical Positivists, claims about God could easily be verifiable/falsifiable. The trouble is that, on this score, the claims just seem patently false. Perhaps this is why the atheist's "argument from evil" has played such a central role

## 2.5 Religious Experience

Many religious people, however, base their claims not on theoretical arguments, but on 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)). On the face of it, however, no matter how distinctive such experiences may be, 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. Indeed, ask yourself how local, personal experiences could possibly provide serious evidence for the existence of a *necessary, eternal, omni-being* responsible for *the creation of the world*? How does the presence of such a being feel differently from that of a merely contingent, finitely old and powerful one? How does one know one is in the presence of the genuine creator of *everything*? (Imagine someone claiming the universe was 15 billion years old *only* on the basis of a gut feeling.) In addition to maybe securing some corroborative evidence for such lavish claims, it would, of course, also be a good idea to run some controlled experiments on such experiences to rule out the effects of, e.g., lively and hyperbolic imaginations, wishful thinking, and, of course, the massive religious indoctrination imposed on everyone in our culture since earliest childhood. These are tall orders, patently not satisfied by isolated experiences alone. This is, of course, where the traditional theoretical arguments would have to take over, fallacies and all.

Note that attention to such reasoning 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 automatically "triggered" or "occasioned" by experience, involving little or no reasoning at all. For example, someone doesn't *infer* from certain sensations that she remembers seeing a cat last week; she just *remembers* seeing one. Whether or not she arrived at this belief by a "justified" route, she is "warranted" in believing she saw a cat insofar as her eyes and memory are reliable. Plantinga then proceeds to claim that human beings are endowed with a special faculty, a "*sensus divinitatus*," which similarly 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

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in discussions.

reason to think that extravagant beliefs occasioned by mountain peaks and free-floating guilt are 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 exist.

## 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 1991: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 the philosopher, G.E. Moore, 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 psychotics. 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 defense of the "warrant" of theism by appeal to a "*sensus devinitatas*" would have to be shown to be in some rationally relevant way different from analogous defenses by (a community of) psychotics or believers in ghosts or gremlins.<sup>13</sup> The question is not whether there are or aren't "basic" or foundational beliefs, but why 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 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!

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13. In fairness, Plantinga (2000:342-73) does attempt to reply to these (what he calls "The Great Pumpkin") worries, noting community practices (cf. Alston 1991) and flaws in ways in which these worries have previously been raised. Suffice it to say that, although he correctly notes that accepting Christian theism doesn't *entail* accepting just any (communal) delusional belief, he fails to suggest what reason we have to exclude the latter if we accept the former. As I mentioned earlier (fn 11), he rejects (pp86,370-71) the perfectly natural candidate I mentioned earlier, *absence of evidence* (after you've looked).

Whatever one may think of the ultimate philosophical significance of Quine's (1969) "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 *all* of our beliefs (whatever that would be like), at least the circle does involve pretty much that *totality*, many parts 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 (always remember: the sceptic needs to base his argument on some premises, so, if he invites you to question *all* your beliefs, you have every right to question his premises as well –which many philosophers have often successfully done). 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.<sup>14</sup>

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 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):

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14. Of course, religious claims enter into a network of sorts: claims about God are supported by claims about faith or a *sensus divinitas*. But what supports *those* claims –telling us when faith is appropriate? Further claims of (meta-)faith and (meta-)sensa –supported in turn by still further meta-meta claims, and so on *ad infinitum*? But what then supports this infinite regress, in the way that our ordinary claims are supported, as it were, from all directions? The point is that it's awfully hard to *restrict* irrationality: any effort to do so would seem to have to bring us back to the less problematic portions of our ordinary network.

Alston (1991) concedes that there is a puzzle about why God "doesn't...make at least the main outlines of the truth [about religious matters] clear to everyone" (p266fn13), indeed: "the verdict of history is that the natural world does not speak of God in an unambiguous fashion" (p234fn13). Curiously, he offers no explanation as to why an omni-god is so coy in this crucial (and convenient) way: why does He perversely make it so unreasonable for people to believe in Him? After all, surely He could arrange for some regular, controlled demonstrations of his powers that would put us atheists in their place once and for all. And the problem, of course, is not to provide some *story* in this regard, but some reason to believe the story is *true*.

**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.<sup>15</sup> 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, or about how their ordinary beliefs form a vast interlocking network. But, in 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. Imagine a jury hearing testimony by a defendant appealing to a *sensus spiritatus* on behalf of a claim that there was someone else at the scene of the crime: is it really in the cards that they would take it seriously "beyond a reasonable doubt"?

**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. 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.<sup>16</sup> For example, most would agree if they were examining 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. 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 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 Liseux. 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

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15. Thus, I disagree with Quinn (1985) who defends atheism mostly for "intellectually sophisticated adults in our culture" (p481), relying on the kinds of arguments of Freud, Marx and Durkheim that, I agree with Plantinga, are entirely inadequate; cf. fn 7 above.

16. 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.

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).

A *caveat*: as Chris Bernard (2001) emphasized in reply to me, many people who should know better are prey to such (as we call them) "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* 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.

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 (or, alternatively, "sacrificed his son as a way of thereby sacrificing *himself*"). 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).<sup>17</sup> When Israelites consorted with Midianite women, Yahweh visits on them a plague in 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

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17. 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 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.

emphatically repudiate the passages that seem to endorse the very same kinds of acts.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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

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18. 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.

19. 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.



the history of quantum physics has shown in often startling ways, there is no claim so sacrosanct that some good scientist (or scientifically minded philosopher) might not reasonably challenge it.<sup>20</sup> Of course, the challenge is on the basis of other beliefs –it makes no sense to challenge *all* of one’s beliefs at once– but those beliefs in turn can be challenged in terms of still others, and so forth, with no particular belief having to be based upon faith or revelation. As Quine (1960), put it (in terms of a nice metaphor that’s come to be known as “Neurath’s boat,” after the German philosopher, Otto Neurath): 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.

**3.5 Detail Resistance:** This continual revision and 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 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? 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

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20. Consider, for example, Hilary Putnam’s (1975) proposal to revise basic logic in view of quantum problems. I’ve heard it claimed that “Occam’s Razor” (“don’t multiply entities beyond necessity”) is a “creed,” but it just seems common sense (a stronger claim is less likely to be true than a weaker one), which we have no serious reason to revise. Note that the claim of revisability is itself revisable, and might well be revised in the light of more detailed knowledge of confirmation than we presently possess (see my 1998).

(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.

Of course, theologians do discuss details. As I confessed from the start, 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* (as I noted earlier, rendering theistic claims *compatible* with the rest of one’s beliefs is not the same as rendering them *confirmed*). Mere elaborations of the theological stories without confirmation –mere stories about “angels on the head of a pin”– don’t constitute such details. 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 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.

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.

On the other hand, even as merely symbolic, many of the stories seem still pretty horrific. Consider again the genocidal stories of Genesis, Joshua; or the account of the murder of the first-born that is regularly recited at seders. Surely it doesn't matter whether these stories are literally true or not: genocide shouldn't be celebrated even symbolically! Which, of course, is perfectly obvious, at least to non-racist minds. But why continue to recite them? Again, imagine descendants fo Nazis or Al Queda defending the symbolic significance of the Holocaust or the 9/11 destruction of the World Trade Center.

**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; 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 the universe consists, overwhelmingly, of vast tracts of empty space,

dotted with horrendous explosions and careening rubble, amidst most of which any living thing would be annihilated in 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 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.

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.” It would be 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 –and that the emperor hadn't a clue about them either! Why does the “word of god” not even *mention* all these other people? Leave aside the issue of their moral status, and what fate awaits them in the Hereafter: the simpler question is just what Christians are to make of these people's complete ignorance of Christianity and --up until their worldly discovery-- Christianity's utter disregard of them?

One standard story (at least about all these people's ignorance) 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 and possibly horrific 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 *many hundreds and hundreds of millions* of, e.g., Chinese, Indians, Polynesians, Africans, Native Americans who hadn't or haven't had 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, slightly more plausible stories that other Christians tell here –I've heard that George Bush once claimed "we all 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. And so it's hard to see how anyone could take themselves to be in a position to seriously believe that the Bible is the word of God.

**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 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 (cf. fn. 14 above)? 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 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” (or any of the regress of meta-claims about faith mentioned in fn 15). 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.

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 don'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:** 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. Of course, one can well understand the desperation of someone praying in such circumstances, or in a foxhole or in the throes of unrequited love. But such desperations are just that, and do not *per se* manifest serious belief (as Neils Bohr is

reputed to have said in being asked why he kept a horseshoe over his door, “I’ve been told they work even if you don’t believe they do”).

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.

A reader of an earlier version of this article added the following further remark: for 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. But some motivations are philosophical, and deserve to be addressed here.

One thing many people find satisfying is being a part of some emotionally fulfilling *community* or *project* they endorse that goes beyond their own individual lives: one’s family, community, tribe, nation; art, knowledge, etc.<sup>21</sup> 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

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21. Plantinga (2000) dismisses wishful thinking as a plausible explanation, given the daunting prospects of “divine wrath and even damnation” (p195). But this neglects the immense attractiveness of being part of a universal family and/or drama, particular an ethically and aesthetically pleasing one, no matter (within limits) how unpleasant one’s particular role in it might be. Better that than nothing!



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 manuscripts). 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 be metaphysically impossible for it to have any meaning beyond itself!<sup>22</sup> (And would it help to be *eternal*? If something isn't meaningful over a finite time, it's hard to see how it would gain meaning by being extended *forever*: eternal pointlessness might well be worse than death!)

Just so, the depressives among us might observe. But while the above consideration may well condemn our lives 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. It seems to me another instance of the "philosophy fallacy" to think that one needs grand metaphysical, religious stories in order to genuinely or legitimately enjoy the good things that life does sometimes afford.

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

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22. I've sometimes wondered whether this demand for further projects might be satisfied *infinitely*, and in infinite dimensions, so that, even for any infinite nesting of projects, there would always be a further project of which that infinite nesting was an integral part --and there would be no "legitimate totality" of the lot of them, so that every legitimate "why" question would in fact have an answer. But I found it hard to believe that someone depressed by the "meaningless" of it all would be satisfied by this fantasy. And this made me wonder why this shouldn't be a reason to be perfectly happy with standard human-sized projects in the first place. I suspect that worries about the meaninglessness of it all may be just another instance of the philosophy fallacy—thinking one needs heavy philosophical theory where just plain commonsense would suffice.

would justify the sufferings of, for example, children slowly 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.

Perhaps, though, this is where a little self-deception 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 (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* William James' (1897/1992) famous discussion of "the will to believe," 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.

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. 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 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.<sup>23</sup> 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 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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23. Plantinga (2000:207-8) goes so far as to claim that

the doctrine of original sin...has been *verified* in the wars, cruelty and 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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