How should we explain the account in the Book of Genesis of a worldwide flood (Genesis 6:1–8:22)? One way is to say it actually happened – that God exists and caused a worldwide deluge that lasted forty days and that Noah survived to tell about it. While possible (in a very broad sense), this explanation strikes even most theists as deeply implausible, simply because it does not square with the data we have from numerous scientific fields like geology, paleontology, and biology. Furthermore, while some theists feel committed to a literal interpretation of their sacred texts, most subscribe to a hermeneutic whereby at least some parts of scripture need not be taken literally. So explaining the Flood story by saying God really did it is not only implausible, for most theists it is unnecessary.

Another way to ‘explain’ the Flood story would be to dismiss it as just another strange myth, yet that answer fails to account for the prevalence of similar flood stories throughout the ancient world, including in the Epic of Gilgamesh and in Greek and Roman mythology. Flatly dismissing the Flood story as completely fabricated and factually ungrounded leaves us less than fully satisfied intellectually. But what could the Flood story be if not just pure myth?

A scientific picture is emerging that, though controversial, seems to offer a plausible history of the Flood story as arising from distortion of reports of a real occurrence (Ryan and Pitman 1997). Archaeological and geological evidence indicates that, about 7,500 years ago, what is now the Black Sea was a dry basin inhabited by humans. Due to rising waters brought about by the end of the Ice Age, a natural dam at what is now the Bosporus Straits was broken, with a vast area being flooded in the course of a few months. The ruins of whole villages have been found beneath the Black Sea. This cataclysm was likely preserved in ancient Near Eastern myth and spread globally. It found its way into many religious texts, including the Book of Genesis.

Supposing this account of the Flood is true, it is a satisfying explanation. It ties together disparate facts the way good scientific explanations are supposed to do. The explanation involves no mysterious forces or supernatural powers. It confines itself to empirically verifiable claims and thus is much easier to accept than the religious explanation that there really was a worldwide flood caused by God. Yet this explanation also shows a measure of respect to the religious traditions of which the Flood story is an element. Although the explanation does not involve God, it also takes the Flood story as something worth investigating scientifically. In seeking an answer to the question of where it came from, those advancing this explanation honor the

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Flood story and the religious traditions of which it is a part more than those who simply dismiss it as an ancient fabrication of illiterate shepherds.

Might all of religion likewise be explained in a scientific manner? Such is the hope of many ‘philosophical naturalists’. Roughly, naturalists believe that only natural entities exist — that there are no gods, ghosts, or supernatural entities of any sort — and that the best way to obtain knowledge of the world is through the methods of science. (This short description, though capturing the spirit of self-described naturalists, masks significant complexity and controversy; see Witmer 2012.) By definition, all naturalists are atheists, though not all atheists are naturalists. For example, Theravada Buddhists deny that any gods exist and so are atheists, but they also say the material world is an illusion and so are not naturalists either. Still, most atheists avow naturalism, and even many theists adopt naturalism as their working assumption for scientific purposes. A naturalistic explanation of religion is an explanation of religion that presupposes naturalism.

Many naturalists claim all of the phenomena of religion — the content of religious texts, the character of religious and mystical experiences, the nature of rituals, the structure of religious organizations, the effect of religion in history, politics, and economics, and so on — can be accounted for solely in terms of natural forces. For them, religion is a predictable consequence of known or knowable natural causes. Why people believe in gods, spirits, and souls is no more of a mystery than why children sometimes make imaginary friends, why mobs form, why people believe in good luck and jinxes, and why every culture has burial rituals. These naturalists acknowledge the real occurrence of (most) religious phenomena yet explain those phenomena without any reference whatsoever to supernatural objects or forces. To take Christianity as an example, they think the contents of the Bible, the experiences people have when they claim to feel God’s presence, and the rapid spread of Christianity in the Roman era all can be explained in purely natural terms. There is a long history of naturalistic explanations of religion drawing from the traditional social sciences: anthropology, sociology, economics, and psychology. The favored naturalistic explanations of religion nowadays involve parts of these classic approaches, but add a new theoretical element: evolutionary biology.

Collectively, these explanations seem to provide powerful support for naturalism. First, they promise to make naturalism intellectually satisfying by resolving what biologist E.O. Wilson calls ‘the enduring paradox of religion’ (1975: 561) — namely, ‘that so much of its substance is demonstrably false, yet it remains a driving force in all societies’. By the lights of the naturalist, the existence, prevalence, and power of religion is a puzzle demanding a solution. These explanations promise to solve that puzzle. Second, it seems that if naturalists really can explain all the phenomena of religion without needing to posit the actual existence of gods, angels, demons, souls, spirits, reincarnation, karma, or miracles, then they have not only shown naturalism is consistent with all observed facts, they have shown the naturalistic worldview is superior to any religious worldview. That is, in fact, the way many naturalists view their theory of religion — as a weapon to wound an already weakened set of rivals. ‘We’ve got God by the throat and I’m not going to stop until one of us is dead’, psychologist Jesse Bering was quoted as saying (Murray 2009: 169).

Naturalistic theories of religion, then, are not just of scientific interest; their religious and philosophical implications are profound. These theories thus demand close attention. Our examination of them begins by surveying three classic approaches and two evolutionary ones, seeing both how they differ and what they have in common. It ends with an evaluation of the philosophical and religious implications of the naturalistic theories of religion. Note that the division of theories into clear categories is a bit artificial. Few naturalists restrict their explanation of religion to just one approach. But for almost every naturalist approach, one takes precedence
over the others. Space necessitates the survey be wide-ranging and thematic. For a more detailed presentation of classic approaches, readers are advised to consult Thrower (1999); for evolutionary approaches, readers should go to Boyer (2001) and Schloss and Murray (2009).

Three classic approaches to explaining religion naturalistically

*Anthropomorphic projection theories*

Almost 350 years ago philosophers as diverse as Thomas Hobbes (1651/1996) and Baruch Spinoza (1677/1982) asserted that religion results from failed efforts at explanation. According to this approach, primitive humans mistakenly projected human qualities onto the natural world in the course of trying to explain it. This led to religion. There are four basic elements to this theory: (A) primitive humans were hyperactive explainers; (B) primitive humans were biased towards purposive explanations; (C) primitive humans projected their own psychological states onto the gods they created; (D) through the power of culture, modern humans inherited the religious beliefs of their primitive ancestors.

(A) *Hyperactive explaining*

‘It is peculiar to the nature of man, to be inquisitive into the causes of the events they see’, said Hobbes (1651/1996: 71). We humans are unique amongst animals in being active (indeed, hyperactive) explainers. We are reluctant to accept that some things happen by chance or without a purpose. Thus phenomena such as a bolt of lightning killing a fellow tribe member, a child’s being born the same day an elder dies, or a disease’s ravaging a nearby village were never simply dismissed as chance. Instinct drove our primitive ancestors to seek some explanation or other of such phenomena.

(B) *Purposive explanation*

Primitive humans, lacking scientific procedures, relied on the form of explanation best suited to their nascent social world: purposive explanation. Purposive explanations (also called ‘intentional’ or ‘personal’ explanations) involve purposes: desire, need, jealousy, anger, and so on. When they saw something they did not understand, our ancestors posited a person to explain it, because that was the only kind of explanation they knew how to give. If it thundered, our cave-dwelling ancestors reasoned, then someone must have wanted it to thunder.

(C) *Projection*

If a person has the power to cause lightning to strike, then care must be taken not to become the target of that person. In order to avoid things like lightning strikes, our ancestors needed to figure out the purposes of these mysterious, powerful beings. Since they could not communicate with these non-existent beings, humans projected their purposes onto the gods. (Projection is the psychological phenomenon of attributing to someone else one’s own thoughts and feelings.) Primitive humans made the supernatural beings out to be just like the natural beings with which they were most familiar: themselves. This led to a curiosity. ‘Among so many of Nature’s blessings they were bound to discover quite a number of disasters, such as storms, earthquakes, diseases and so forth, and they maintained that these occurred because the gods were angry at the wrongs done to them by men, or the faults committed in the course of their worship’, said
Spinoza (1677/1982: 58). To placate the gods, the gods had to be provided with food or with gestures of submission, just as one would feed a guest or bow to a king to keep the king happy. This fear of the gods and desire to please them explains religious rituals, practices of abasement and worship, sacrificial offerings, and so on.

(D) Cultural transmission

The belief in gods persists because religion is culturally transmitted; once religious belief entered the human mind, it got passed down from generation to generation. Even ‘advanced’ religions such as Christianity can be explained in terms of the same fundamental patterns displayed in ‘primitive’ religions, with the difference between ‘primitive’ and ‘advanced’ being that the latter have had more time, resources, and need to tidy up their stories than the former.

Sociological theories

Over 150 years ago, philosopher and economist Karl Marx advanced a theory of religion within his larger theory of politics, economics, and society. For Marx, religion emerges from powerful societal forces. It is primarily a group phenomenon, not an individual one. There are four basic elements to this theory: (E) the religion of a society is a product of its social, political, and economic structures; (F) the religious beliefs and practices of individuals in a society reflect the social, political, and economic dynamics of that society; (G) religion serves a dual function with respect to social control: the powerful use it to oppress, and the oppressed comfort themselves with it rather than revolt against their oppressors; (H) as a society moves toward justice and equality, religion becomes increasingly unnecessary; as we approach social perfection, religion will wither away.

(E) The sociological thesis

Sociology is the study of societies and social structures as natural objects amenable to scientific investigation. Sociologists study human societies with the same mindset that primatologists study bands of gorillas. From this perspective, religious beliefs and practices are just further aspects of human societies – strange in many ways, to be sure, but still explicable in terms of the functions they fulfill in the complex machinery of social life. For example, in The Rise of Christianity, sociologist Rodney Stark (1996) explains the flourishing of Christianity in the late Roman Empire in terms of the advantageous structures it created. ‘Central doctrines of Christianity prompted and sustained attractive, liberating, and effective social relations and organizations’, he writes (1996: 211). He says its emphasis on community and caring allowed Christian communities to withstand epidemic diseases much better than non-Christian ones (1996: Chapter 4). Stark thinks Christianity’s rise can be explained in terms of the social functions it performed – promoting literacy, strengthening family bonds, surviving disasters, and so on. More generally, sociologists of religion seek to explain all major facets of religion in terms of religion’s effect on society.

(F) The reflection thesis

For proponents of the sociological approach, religion is a primitive form of psychological and sociological speculation. Figuring out other people is terribly difficult. Understanding society is even harder. Lacking the tools of science, primitive humans tried to understand themselves and their societies as best they could – through myth and through reflection on their gods. Consequently,
if you want to understand how the people of a society think of themselves – if you want to understand their pre-philosophical, pre-scientific conception of what it is to be human and of what society is – then study their religion. This was the view of Ludwig Feuerbach, an early nineteenth-century philosopher and anthropologist whose writings influenced Marx profoundly. ‘Religion is man’s earliest and also indirect form of self-knowledge’, said Feuerbach (1841/1957: 13–14). ‘His own nature is in the first instance contemplated by him as that of another being. … The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or, rather, the human nature purified.’ Marx likewise claimed religion holds up a cracked mirror to society. ‘The religious world is but the reflex of the real world’, said Marx (1867). ‘Religion is the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again; it is ‘an inverted world-consciousness’, he said (1844). Like Feuerbach and Marx before them, advocates of the sociological approach today see religion as reflecting society and the close study of religion as revealing hidden social structures and dynamics.

(G) The oppression thesis

Religion arises, Marx claimed, because society is divided into classes: patricians and plebeians, lords and serfs, or – in capitalism – the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In each case we can identify one class as the oppressors and another as the oppressed. The poor, weak oppressed need relief from their suffering, so they create a fantasy world beyond this one where their pain is soothed. ‘Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people’, wrote Marx (1844). The rich, powerful oppressors, meanwhile, use religion to justify their oppression and to keep themselves in power. They create ‘ideologies’ – sets of ideas that impose social control. Examples include the caste system in India and the doctrine that kings rule by divine right. These ideologies perpetuate oppression by convincing the oppressed that divine powers validate the oppressive social structures. Even seemingly benign elements of religious ethics can play a role in the system of oppression. For example, Marx alleges the common religious demand to engage in charity privileges the ruling classes, since they are the ones best able to display this virtue. The injunction to give to the poor thus elevates the wealthy and keeps the poor down. The emphasis on charity also provides an inbuilt justification for never addressing the root causes of poverty that make charity necessary – namely, unjust social structures.

(H) The secularization thesis

The oppression thesis suggests a corollary – that if oppressive social structures are eliminated, there will be no need for religion. As social structures become less oppressive – as the relationships between humans become ever more just and equitable – religious belief will become less common. So social progress leads to secularization. The eventual result will be a world without religion. ‘The religious reflex of the real world can, in any case, only then finally vanish, when the practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellowmen and to Nature’, said Marx (1867). That is, once society is re-shaped on a fair and equitable basis, religion will go away. Call this belief ‘the secularization thesis’. The belief is widespread. ‘For nearly three centuries, social scientists and assorted Western intellectuals have been promising the end of religion’, write Rodney Stark and Roger Finke (2000: 57). ‘Each generation has been confident that within another few decades, or possibly a bit longer, humans will “outgrow” belief in the supernatural.’
Freudian psychological theories

Almost 100 years ago, pioneering psychologist Sigmund Freud laid out a theory of religion in popular books such as The Future of an Illusion (1927/1989) and Civilization and Its Discontents (1930/1989). His theory incorporated elements of both the anthropomorphic projection and sociological approaches, but Freud added a quite new ingredient to the naturalistic broth: the idea that religion results from unconscious mental processes common to all humans. Deep-seated psychological forces – forces that shape our minds from birth – push us to believe in God or in gods. There are four basic elements to this theory: (I) subconscious mental mechanisms powerfully affect our beliefs and our actions; (J) some of these subconscious mental mechanisms are not aimed at producing true beliefs; (K) the psychological development of a person from infant to adult progresses through age-appropriate stages, yet humans tend to go back to some age-inappropriate stage in the face of frustration of their desires; (L) religion results from the unconscious mental process of wish-fulfillment, a process aimed at anxiety-reduction rather than truth; it involves regression to an infantile psychic state, wherein one receives total love and protection from one’s parents.

(I) Subconscious mental processes

Freud’s signal contribution to psychology was his identification of universal, innate, subconscious mental mechanisms – mental processes that have an enormous effect on what we believe and on how we act, and yet never make themselves known to us (unless we undergo special procedures such as psychoanalysis). Nowadays belief in unconscious mental processes is so widespread that their existence is taken for granted. Indeed, most of us have explained someone else’s behavior in terms of processes such as projection and repression. Yet the idea of subconscious mental processes the nature of which can be revealed by careful investigation blossomed with Freud.

(J) Mental processes not aimed at the truth

Some mental processes typically aim to produce true beliefs. Take memory as an example. When you try to remember something – say, where your keys are – the goal is to retrieve the truth. Freud claimed that a crucial feature of many subconscious mental processes is that they aim to produce something other than true belief. For example, extremely painful experiences such as combat stress are blocked out of conscious thought, resulting in ‘repressed’ memories that can only be unlocked by psychotherapy. In cases like these, the goal of the subconscious mental process is to avoid the truth, not retrieve it.

(K) Psychological development

Newborns lack the full array of mental tools had by adult humans. Freud thought the passage from infant to adult proceeds jaggedly and through stages (oral, anal, and genital for children), just as our bodily development occurs in distinct stages (infancy, adolescence, maturity, senescence). Importantly for Freud, psychological progression never completely erases earlier stages, so that ‘regression’ (going back) to an earlier, age-inappropriate stage remains possible. Frustration of one’s basic desires – for love, sex, status, or revenge – can cause so much psychic strain that one copes by regressing. For example, the stockbroker caught cheating at business and surrounded by officials ready to make an arrest might collapse to the floor and mutter ‘I want my mommy.’
(L) Religion as wish-fulfillment

Freud identified wish-fulfillment as one of many mental processes not aimed at the truth. Wish-fulfillment aims to reduce anxiety by presenting as probable or actual states of affairs that in reality are very unlikely, if not impossible. For example, buyers of lottery tickets get relief from the tedium of their impoverished lives by thinking ahead to the goods they will buy when they win the lottery. The intensity of their belief is out of all proportion to the probability that it is true. Belief in God, said Freud, arises from a combination of wish-fulfillment and regression to an age-inappropriate psychological stage. Faced with the harsh realities of life, humans seek a ‘father figure’ – a being possessing precisely the features of a small child’s idealized picture of a parent. To the helpless infant, parents are all-powerful, all-knowing, loving, just, and mysterious. The sense of security an infant feels when doted on by a parent is overwhelmingly good. The loss of that sense is painful. In the face of anxiety, adults unconsciously seek to regain that feeling they had as children. They thus create objects to fill the role that their demystified parents no longer play. Gods result.

Two evolutionary approaches to explaining religion

As with the classic approaches, evolutionary approaches find the source of religion in the human realm – in our minds and our societies. Much more so than the classic approaches from the social sciences, however, the view of the mind and of society underlying the evolutionary approaches derives from a scientifically rich and well-supported biological theory: Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection. From its beginnings 150 years ago, evolutionary theory has been used to answer basic questions like where humans came from, why they walk on two feet and have opposable thumbs, and how they are related to other animals. In the last half-century, however, evolutionary theory has increasingly been applied to human mental and social structures themselves.

Explaining religion through evolutionary psychology

According to proponents of ‘evolutionary psychology’, human thought – both conscious and unconscious – arose in a certain sort of environment. It has quirks and oddities that are best explained in terms of their usefulness to our ancestors. Nowadays, craving sweets leads to obesity, but in the low-calorie environment of the paleolithic era, that urge for high-calorie food helped keep our ancestors alive. Likewise, though now we call them fallacious, belief-forming processes like hasty generalization and stereotyping were ‘adaptive’ for our primitive ancestors. That is, those processes contributed to the survival and reproduction of their bearers. Nowadays, when one person dies after eating a mushroom, we can employ an array of scientific tests to determine what, exactly, in the mushroom caused the death. Back then, however, believing all mushrooms are poisonous was close to the optimal strategy, even if the belief was false. Those who believed all mushrooms are poisonous were more likely to survive and reproduce than the riskier sorts of eaters. According to proponents of evolutionary psychology, the tendency to form useful-but-mistaken beliefs was a heritable trait that became ‘hard-wired’ into us. These error-prone belief-forming processes create religion.

The evolutionary psychology approach to religion comprises four basic elements: (M) the human mind is best viewed, not as a unified whole, but as a collection of modules that evolved to perform specific tasks. These modules can be adaptive without producing true beliefs; (N) several of our mental modules are devoted to detecting and responding to other agents, so our minds are predisposed to see agency, intention, and purpose everywhere; (O) mental modules
equip all humans with templates for belief, including beliefs about the agents we detect. These
templates strongly constrain possible religious beliefs. Despite the seeming diversity of religions,
all religions share underlying similarities due to the constraints imposed by the templates these
modules provide; (P) religion is a byproduct of a mental architecture that evolved to navigate
the natural and social worlds inhabited by our primitive ancestors. Although the specific mental
processes that give rise to religion are all adaptive in the right environment, they can and often
do lead to false beliefs, including religious ones.

(M) Mental modules: adaptive, not truth-seeking
Just as the software package of a computer contains a host of subprograms and applications, say
cognitive psychologists, the human mind is composed of a patchwork of mental modules. These
modules are brain subsystems devoted to specific tasks like classifying objects as people, animals,
plants, or tools, remembering faces, and assessing risk. Cognitive psychology is the study of these
mental modules. They can be advantageous to their bearers even if they predictably fail in certain
situations. Psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky famously called the rules under-
lying these modules ‘heuristics’ – decision-making shortcuts that work most of the time but fail in
specific, identifiable circumstances (Kahneman 2012). Their key insight was that decision-making
in the real world takes place in a demanding environment. Factors such as ease, speed, and the
necessity of avoiding calamities often work against the rational ideal of generating all and only
true beliefs. Take hasty generalization as an example. While ideally it should be avoided, out in
the real world making snap judgments might be the optimal strategy. Rather than spend time and
risk death by testing out an array of mushrooms, a person might conclude that all mushrooms are
poisonous after just one or two bad experiences with them.

(N) Theory of mind
In cognitive psychology, an ‘agent’ is any being that seems to move of its own volition and for its
own purposes. Agents include animals as well as humans. Since agents were amongst both the
most threatening and most desirable objects in the environment of our primitive ancestors,
evolution produced sophisticated methods for detecting agents. For example, our ancestors
bequeathed us various mechanisms for discerning whether the noise intruding on our night-time
campfire is a person, a predatory animal, or just the wind. These mechanisms produce a high
percentage of false positives (mistakenly thinking there is an agent around when in fact there is
not) in order to avoid calamities often work against the rational ideal of generating all and only
true beliefs. Take hasty generalization as an example. While ideally it should be avoided, out in
the real world making snap judgments might be the optimal strategy. Rather than spend time and
risk death by testing out an array of mushrooms, a person might conclude that all mushrooms are
poisonous after just one or two bad experiences with them.

(O) Universal templates for religious belief
Possession of the mental modules studied by cognitive psychologists, including the ones devoted
to agency detection, is not limited to particular humans at particular times. It is universal. If
religion is produced by these universal mental modules, we should expect all religions to show
signs of coming from the same recipe. Proponents of the evolutionary psychology approach point
to a host of universal features of religious belief, correlating each feature with an appropriate
mental module. For example, in almost all religions, the supernatural beings worshipped are not abstract entities like The Force from Star Wars. They are agents – God, Shiva, Zeus. This is no accident. Because of hyperactive agency detection, ‘agent-like concepts of gods and spirits are natural,’ says anthropologist Pascal Boyer (2001: 245). Likewise, it is a universal feature of religion that the gods and spirits worshipped are social beings who are motivated to interact with us and who possess ‘strategic information’ (Boyer 2001: 150–63) such as what our enemies plan to do or whether a drought will end soon. This feature of religion comes from the array of social-interaction modules with which all normal humans are equipped.

(P) Religion as a byproduct of our underlying evolved psychology

Putting these three strands together, proponents of the evolutionary psychology approach say they can explain religion as a product of our own minds – minds that evolved to help all humans survive a world in which other agents were a central concern. Religion is universal because the basic structure of the human mind is universal. ‘The explanation for religious beliefs and behaviors is to be found in the way all human minds work’, says Boyer (2001: 2). Our in-built mental modules, evolved to make inferences about agents, actually create the gods and spirits religious people worship, entreat, and contemplate. Knowing how our minds work, then, it is no surprise religion arose amongst us. But that is no reason to think religious beliefs are true, any more than the ‘naturalness’ of fallacious belief-forming processes like hasty generalization makes the beliefs produced by those mechanisms true.

Sociobiological explanations of religion

A quite different strand of explanation, yet one still under the evolutionary umbrella, was first articulated by evolutionary biologist E.O. Wilson, author of the controversial classic Sociobiology: The New Synthesis (1975). Sociobiology, says Wilson, rests on viewing social behaviors – from the activities of a bee hive or an ant mound to the organization of human society – as resulting from evolution by natural selection. The right sorts of social behaviors (e.g., bees swarming when the hive is disturbed) confer advantages on the groups that practice them – advantages that can be selected for by nature. Towards the end of his book, Wilson speculates that the rise and spread of various religious and ethical systems can be explained in these terms. ‘A form of group selection operates in the competition between sects’, says Wilson (1975: 561). ‘Those that gain adherents survive; those that cannot, fail. Consequently, religions, like other human institutions, evolve so as to further the welfare of their practitioners.’ In what ways does religion promote group survival? Religions the doctrines of which encourage group defense or high rates of reproduction, Wilson thinks, survive better and come to have more adherents. The explanation for the belief that martyrs go directly to Heaven is that those with the belief are more willing to fight and die for their social group than those without it. Thus societies that transmit the belief that martyrs go directly to Heaven have an advantage in combat. ‘God wills it’, says Wilson (1975: 561), ‘but the summed Darwinian fitness of the tribe was the ultimate if unrecognized beneficiary.’ Likewise, he thinks, successful religions teach procreation is a religious duty. ‘Be fruitful and multiply’ (Genesis 9:7) is the sort of belief sociobiology predicts successful religions will have; without such beliefs, a religion will wither from lack of new members.

Sociobiological explanations involve two ideas that are controversial amongst Darwinians. Together they lead to a third idea which is the core of the sociobiological approach to religion. (Q) Traits that are not adaptive for an individual organism might nonetheless bring an advantage to the group of which the individual is a member, so it makes sense to talk about natural
selection at the level of the social group. (R) Evolutionary explanations can invoke a unit of selection other than the gene: the ‘meme’. Memes are ideas and cultural practices that can be treated as heritable traits, passed on from one generation to the next and spreading from one culture to another by imitation. (S) The origin, spread, and current distribution of religious beliefs and practices can be explained in terms of the contribution religious memes make to the survival and reproduction of the human social groups that hold them.

(Q) Group selection

Most people conceive of natural selection – ‘survival of the fittest’ – as operating on individual organisms. But in principle natural selection can operate at other levels of organization, so long as an appropriate unit of selection is identified. Consider ‘kin selection’, which operates at the level of the gene. A behavior that decreases the chances of an individual spreading all of its own genes can nonetheless be selected for if it increases the chances that the genes of its kin are spread, since kin share many genes. This explains why worker bees sacrifice their lives for the sake of the hive; the worker bees are the queen’s offspring, so they all share genes. By defending the hive, the ‘self-sacrificing’ bees are actually helping spread some of their own genes. This example suggests that some ‘unselfish’ behaviors like dying on behalf of others – behaviors that, intuitively, seem inexplicable in Darwinian terms – might actually be explicable in terms of benefit at a non-individual level. Sociobiological explanations operate at the level of the group; they involve what is called ‘group selection’. Although largely rejected in the middle of the twentieth century, group selectionist explanations are more common in evolutionary biology nowadays. Sociobiologists think moral behaviors such as altruism can be explained, in part, in terms of group selection.

(R) Memes

Not only are evolutionary explanations not confined to individual organisms, they are not restricted to tangible, physical items. While the most common unit of selection in evolutionary biology, the gene, clearly has a physical bearer (DNA), we can treat more abstract items as fundamental units of selection. Philosopher of biology Peter Godfrey-Smith coined the term ‘Darwinian population’ to mean ‘a population – a collection of particular things – that has the capacity to undergo evolution’, with the members of the population featuring ‘variation in individual character, which affects reproductive output, and which is heritable’ (Godfrey-Smith 2009: 6). On that broad definition, we can talk of the evolution of things like languages, even though languages consist of non-physical, abstract items like words. Some evolutionary explanations of religion work with this broad conception of natural selection, with the units of selection being religious ‘memes’. ‘Memes are units of culture: notions, values, stories, etc. that get people to speak or act in certain ways that make other people store a replicated version of these mental units’, says Boyer (2001: 35). Marriage rites, ethical maxims, theological claims about the nature of God – all are memes and so all can, potentially, be explained in terms of evolution by natural selection.

(S) Advantages to the group of religious memes

Combining group selection with memetics suggests exploring what the benefit is to the group of the religious meme. Wilson thinks he can explain a lot about religion this way. ‘It is useful to hypothesize that cultural details are for the most part adaptive in a Darwinian sense, even though
some may operate indirectly through enhanced group survival’ he says (1975: 560). This leads him to suggest a host of connections between religious memes and societal benefits: ‘human rituals. … not only label but reaffirm and rejuvenate the moral values of the community’ (1975: 560); ‘[religious] ceremonies can offer information on the strength and wealth of tribes and families’ (1975: 561); and ‘shibboleths, special costumes, and sacred dancing and music’ bring about ‘religious experience’, making the individual ‘ready to reassert allegiance to his tribe and family, perform charities, consecrate his life, leave for the hunt, join the battle, die for God and country’ (1975: 561). Once we ascend to the level of the group, say sociobiologists, many otherwise puzzling features of religion are readily explained.

How the evolutionary theories draw from the classic theories

Many proponents of evolutionary theories of religion say those theories mark a clean break from the classic theories. They see in their favored approach the potential for breakthroughs unachievable by the older approaches. ‘With the new millennium a new scientific study of religion has emerged’, says psychologist Justin Barrett (2009: 76). In this volume, religion scholar Todd Tremlin calls it ‘the cognitive science of religion’ and says it ‘represents a synthesis of state-of-the-art cognitive science and traditional religion studies’ (Tremlin, this volume: 390). And in Religion Explained, Boyer spends the bulk of the first chapter (2001: 4–31) identifying the problems with the classic approaches to clear the way for his own evolutionary approach. However, our survey of the evolutionary approaches shows that, thematically at least, they bear a strong resemblance to the classic ones. Were Hobbes, Spinoza, Marx, and Freud alive today, they would see many of their ideas about religion reflected in the new evolutionary theories.

As an example, let us look at a particular feature of theistic religions to compare the evolutionary explanation of it with the classic explanation. All believers in God are supposed to think God is all-knowing (omniscient) and all-powerful (omnipotent). Why is this so? Why is God not thought to be limited in power or knowledge? Barrett (2009: 89–93) invokes research findings from childhood psychology. He says ‘belief in the divine attributes of a supergod such as those in Abrahamic traditions receives special support from cognitive structures. Specifically, super-knowledge, super-perception, super-power (especially to create natural things), and immortality all benefit from the operation of mental tools in childhood development’ (2009: 90). Regarding omniscience, he says ‘In the enormous area of research concerning children’s developing Theory of Mind, data strongly support the position that before around five years of age (and sometimes later) children assume that everyone’s beliefs about the world are infallible. That is, if a three-year-old child knows that he has a coin in his pocket, he assumes that his mother, too, will know that he has a coin in his pocket’ (2009: 90). As with omniscience, Barrett explains the attribution to God of omnipotence as arising from ‘children’s tendency to treat adults as god-like by overestimating their strength and power’ (2009: 92).

Compare Barrett’s theory to Freud’s. For Freud, God is the believer’s substitute for the god-like parents lost to maturation as the nascent theist moves from infancy into childhood, then adolescence, and then finally adulthood. Incomprehensible and too harsh for us, the adult world leads some of us to regress to a childish stage. ‘The origin of the religious attitude can be traced back in clear outlines as far as the feeling of infantile helplessness’, Freud wrote (1930/1989: 20–21). For Freud, religion is ‘the system of doctrines and promises which. … assures him that a careful Providence will watch over his life and compensate him in a future existence for any frustrations he suffers here. The common man cannot imagine this Providence otherwise than in the figure of an enormously exalted father’ (1930/1989: 22). For Freud, belief in God (I) arises from subconscious mental processes (K) present in our earliest stages of psychological development.
that (J) do not lead to the truth and (L) replicate the child’s idealized conception of the parent. All four elements – (I), (J), (K), and (L) – are present in Barrett’s theory. The basic move is the same for both theorists. The central difference is that Barrett has the benefit of much better (more voluminous, more recent, and more rigorously acquired) scientific evidence for his claims than Freud had.

Other parallels are easy to find. The idea that (M) the mind comprises mental modules that are adaptive, not truth-seeking matches Freud’s idea that (I) there are subconscious mental processes that (J) are not aimed at the truth. The idea that (N) we are hard-wired to over-detect agency as part of our overall Theory of Mind matches the idea of Hobbes and Spinoza that humans are (A) hyperactive explainers who (B) are disposed toward purposive explanations. The idea that (R) religious memes spread across populations and through time and (S) can bring advantages to the societies possessing them matches the ideas that (D) religion is culturally transmitted and (E) can be explained in terms of the social functions it fulfills.

More generally, evolutionary theories of religion that focus on individual psychology fuse themes from the anthropomorphic projection theory of Hobbes and Spinoza with themes from the psychological theory of Freud, while sociobiological theories of religion parallel thematically the sociological theory of Marx. These connections suggest we take with a grain of salt any claim that evolutionary theories of religion represent something totally new. The scientific evidence behind the evolutionary theories is new and powerful, yes, and the newer evolutionary theories refine the classic theories in many important respects, but the basic modes of explanation are quite similar.

Evaluating the naturalistic explanations of religion

Now that we have a grasp of the diverse approaches naturalists take towards explaining religion, we are in a position to evaluate those approaches. In trying to do that, however, we immediately confront a difficulty. Naturalists and the religious are in separate camps. They disagree, not just about the existence of supernatural entities, but about a whole host of philosophical matters: what the proper standards are for rational belief, what the foundations are of morality, even how to define what ‘natural’ is. The divisions are so great that there may be few shared criteria for evaluating the naturalistic explanations of religion. Rather than spend time trying to find enough common ground to give a neutral assessment, let us break the task in two. First we will evaluate the naturalistic explanations of religion from a naturalist perspective, then we will evaluate them from a religious perspective. Readers can decide for themselves how to balance those evaluations.

Naturalistic explanations of religion from a naturalist perspective

Naturalists have a rich and scientifically well-informed array of options for understanding what they encounter in religion. For them, the prospects for explaining religion fully look good. Certainly there are important issues to be settled. For example, there is much debate amongst evolutionary theorists of religion about whether religion is adaptive (Schloss 2009: 14–17; Richerson and Newson 2009; Bloom 2009). Furthermore, evolutionary theorists have yet to say much about atheist religions (religions in which no gods are worshipped). Atheistic religions form a large category, one that includes Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Jainism, and some forms of Hinduism. Despite the work that still needs to be done in important areas like these, however, it appears that naturalists have developed a solid approach to explaining religion, and all that remains is to extend that approach by doing more and better science. Digging deeper, however, we see considerable infighting amongst the naturalists. These divisions suggest the
various approaches to explaining religion naturalistically are incompatible as they stand now and cannot be merged into a unified scientific theory of religion. That, in turn, means naturalists have much work to do developing the theoretical tools to explain religion in a consistent, coherent way.

First division: naturalists who are opposed to evolutionary explanations of religion

The most fundamental split is between those who embrace the use of evolutionary biology and psychology and those who eschew it. In the traditional social sciences – the academic fields of anthropology, sociology, economics, and psychology, as well as intersecting fields like religious studies, ethnic studies, and gender/sexuality studies – there is great resistance to understanding human phenomena through the lens of evolutionary biology. In these fields there is a strong tilt toward ‘social constructionism’ and away from ‘essentialism’. Evolutionary theories of cultural phenomena like religion are seen as threatening to re-introduce a dangerous and discredited idea: ‘human nature’. Some evolutionary theorists – most famously cognitive scientist Steven Pinker (2002) – proudly endorse the idea of human nature, so long as that idea is purged of its religious elements and grounded in modern evolutionary biology. But, as Pinker himself documents, many social scientists do not like his sort of position.

Some advocates of evolutionary approaches to religion are sensitive to the problem. Biologist David Sloan Wilson (no relation to E.O. Wilson) acknowledges, ‘the scientific study of religion has traditionally been the province of anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists’ (2002: 47), and those approaches are still going strong. Furthermore, within those approaches, the trend has been away from, rather than toward, incorporation of evolutionary theory (Richerson and Newson 2009: 101–2). ‘As a newcomer, any modern evolutionary approach to religion must prove itself against these older traditions’, says Wilson (2002: 47). He spends Chapter 2 of *Darwin’s Cathedral* trying to reconcile his new approach with the older ones, in particular his approach with Stark’s sociological approach. But Stark is not in a mood for peace. ‘This entire body of recent work [on the origins of religion from biologists and evolutionary psychologists] is remarkably inferior because so few authors could restrain their militant atheism. Contempt is not a scholarly virtue’, says Stark (2007: 1). Overall, it seems that, for there to be a single, unified, best naturalist theory of religion, those naturalists opposed to taking an evolutionary approach to religion must reconcile themselves with (or surrender themselves to) those in favor of it.

Second division: evolutionary psychologists who are opposed to sociobiology

Another division lies within evolutionary approaches, between evolutionary psychology and sociobiology. As noted earlier, the sociobiological approach rests on two controversial notions: group selection and memes. As we saw in section (R) on memes, we can talk about the evolution of the elements within a Darwinian population if that population has members featuring ‘variation in individual character, which affects reproductive output, and which is heritable’ (Godfrey-Smith 2009: 6). But just because the language of evolution fits a population does not mean the elements of the population are natural items or even really exist (Godfrey-Smith 2009: Chapter 2). For example, ghost stories vary in their individual character. Those variations affect how many times a particular ghost story is told, and each retelling of that ghost story inherits important features of the original. We find it tempting in cases like this to talk about the evolution of ghost stories. But just because we talk that way does not mean we really think ghost stories are natural, physical things, or that ghosts are real. For an evolutionary explanation to be naturalistic, it is not enough that it be evolutionary. The units of selection must be natural entities or be realized by natural entities, in the way that genes are coded in DNA, which is just a
chemical. The process by which they are selected must also be natural – neither gods nor humans can steer things. All of this is just to say that it is crucial to add the modifier ‘by natural selection’ to ‘Darwin’s theory of evolution’. Without it, we lose what makes Darwin’s theory special.

Some evolutionary theorists are sticklers on this point. ‘No one “owns” the concept of natural selection, nor can anyone police the use of the term. But its explanatory power, it seems to me, is so distinctive and important that it should not be diluted by metaphorical, poetic, fuzzy, or allusive extensions that only serve to obscure how profound the genuine version of the mechanism really is’, says Pinker (2012). He goes on to argue at length that the idea of ‘group selection’ is one of those illegitimate extensions of natural selection. Memes, too, have come under attack. In his final analysis of them, Godfrey-Smith says memes (what he sometimes calls ‘cultural variants’ and what Boyer calls ‘units of culture’) constitute a very marginal Darwinian population. ‘The world is full of phenomena that look Darwinian but will not fit this narrow set of requirements [for being a Darwinian population]’, he says (2009: 162); ‘surely the way the world fills up with laptops looks very much like the way it fills up with rabbits.’ Just because we can label ideas, learned behaviors, and even artifacts ‘memes’ does not mean they really are subject to natural selection.

Settling this point is crucial for naturalistic explainers of religion. Without group selection and without memes, the sociobiological theory of religion cannot get off the ground, leaving the evolutionary psychology theory of religion as the lone evolutionary approach. That approach is well-suited to explaining ‘individualist’ aspects of religion (conceptions of God, religious experience, etc.) but is poorly suited to explaining ‘groupish’ aspects of religion (the structure of religious organizations, the growth and spread of particular religions, etc.). It is the groupish aspects that sociological theories try to explain. Yet the methodology and theoretical commitments of the traditional social sciences are so frequently at odds with those of the evolutionary psychologists (again, see Pinker 2002) that neutral observers would rightly wonder how the two approaches to explaining religion could both be right.

**Naturalistic explanations of religion from a religious perspective**

While naturalists will see the naturalistic theories of religion as promising, religious believers will likely see them as threatening. But should they? To see whether they should, let us consider an analogy. Suppose Alexis and Belinda are good friends who talk about politics often. Alexis is a political conservative and Belinda is a political liberal. The two have an acrimonious debate about social policy. It ends without either one having changed her mind. Coincidentally, the next day Belinda reads Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (2004), touted as ‘unraveling the great political mystery of our day: Why do so many Americans vote against their economic and social interests?’ Inspired, Belinda develops a theory that explains to Belinda’s own satisfaction why Alexis mistakenly endorses political conservatism.

According to Belinda, maladaptive memes have been transmitted from conservatives to Alexis – more precisely, Alexis’s brain. (Where else could memes reside?)

Should Alexis be worried? One thing she might worry about is whether Belinda is right. In that case, she could ask Belinda to explain her theory further and to lend her Frank’s book. Suppose Belinda complies. Alexis spends time reading Frank’s book, as well as some material explaining memes. At the end of the exercise, Alexis concludes that Belinda is wrong – that it is just not true that she, Alexis, holds her conservative beliefs irrationally and does so because conservatives have transmitted maladaptive memes to her brain. Are Alexis’s worries over? No. Now she has a new worry. What could prompt Belinda to develop a theory about Alexis? True friends do not need theories of one another; they get along naturally. Alexis begins to worry...
that Belinda no longer sees Alexis as worth reasoning with, at least when it comes to politics. The state of dialogue must have gotten really bad from Belinda’s perspective for Belinda to develop such a theory about Alexis. What will Belinda do to Alexis next? Shun her? Ostracize her? De-friend her on Facebook? These are real worries for Alexis.

This example suggests two things. First, naturalists explaining religion naturalistically is an instance of a commonplace: believers in a theory extending that theory so it explains why some people stubbornly refuse to believe that theory. Christians have theories about why people are not Christians, Marxists have theories about why people reject Marxism, and so on. Second, the example suggests religious believers should divide the question. First, do the naturalistic theories of religion show the religious believer that her own beliefs are irrational? Second, what do the naturalistic theories of religion signal about the standing of religious believers with naturalists and within the wider society? Are they a sign that bad things are on the way? A few thoughts on the second question will be expressed at the end of this chapter. As for the first question, there are two reasons religious believers can give for thinking the naturalistic explanations of religion do not show their religious beliefs are irrational.

The first reason: the naturalistic explanations misrepresent religion

For any theory of any phenomena to count as a success, it must be true to the facts and sensitive to the complexities of the phenomena explained. Naturalistic theories of religion must explain religion as it really is — not rest on false, distorted, or simplistic claims about religious phenomena. Religious believers can claim — with some justification — that their beliefs and behaviors have been ‘explained’ only via misrepresentation.

For example, several naturalists offer ‘costly signaling’ theories of religion (Bulbulia 2009), whereby charitable giving, altruism, and sacrifice signal high reproductive fitness to potential mates. For example, as part of his sociobiological explanation of religion, E.O. Wilson (1975: 561) says ‘the famous potlatch ceremonies of the Northwest Coast Indians enable individuals to advertise their wealth by the amount of goods they give away’, suggesting a basic explanation for all religiously-demanded charity. Marx had a similar idea. Yet that explanation presupposes charitable giving will be public. Not all religions teach that charitable giving should be public. For example, Christians will respond that making charity public is neither what Jesus taught nor what Christians typically do. ‘When you do an act of charity, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing; your good deed must be secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you’ (Matthew 6: 3–4). The puzzle for naturalists is to explain why anonymous giving happens at all. It really does happen, even if polling data indicate that only 5% of the time is religious conviction the primary reason anonymous mega-donors give anonymously (Jacobs 2012). Indeed, some Christian churches go out of their way to make giving anonymous. They have dispensed with collection plates, instead using a bucket that parishioners approach individually during communion or setting up a process to donate through electronic debit. Many ministers scrupulously shield themselves from knowledge of who donated how much, making sure all such information is handled separately by their treasurers. In the ideal, anonymous Christian charity signals nothing about the giver, so a ‘costly signaling’ explanation of the teaching and practice is unavailable. And, given that anonymous charity removes from the giver all the benefits of advertising, Christianity would seem to discourage charitable giving within the Christian community as a whole. That means we should expect less, not more, overall charitable giving in Christian communities on ‘costly signaling’ theories. But that is the opposite of what we observe (Brooks 2006). Thus ‘costly signaling’ theories simply do not fit
the Christian practice of anonymous charitable giving. At least, this is something Christians can plausibly claim.

Examples multiply. Of the Golden Rule – ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’ (Luke 6:31) – David Sloan Wilson (2002: 96–97) says group selectionists ‘are predicting that a religion instructs believers to behave for the benefit of their group, which is supported by the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule.’ But does the Golden Rule really mean ‘Do unto others in your group as you would have them do unto you’? Christians can plausibly say it does not. (Notice how naturalists seeking to explain religion inevitably get involved in the dicey game of scriptural interpretation.) Treating Jesus as promoting the in-group version of the Golden Rule is even more implausible given the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25–37). ‘And who is my neighbor?’ asks a lawyer. ‘Not just your fellow Jews’, says Jesus, ‘but everyone – even the despised Samaritans.’ So Christians can claim, plausibly, that the Golden Rule has been explained only by misrepresenting it.

Again, consider Jesus’s teaching that aggrieved parties ought to ‘turn the other cheek’ (Matthew 5: 38–42): ‘Do not set yourself against the man who wrongs you. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left. If a man sues you for your shirt, let him have your coat as well.’ Do Christians really believe that? David Sloan Wilson does not think so. He interprets this passage as regulating in-group conduct only, at least when analyzing the catechism Calvin produced for the Genevans (Wilson 2002: 97–98). But at least some Christians (e.g., monks) can plausibly reply that they really do believe it. They do not just refuse to retaliate when harmed. Sometimes they open themselves up to even more harm, and behave that way towards anyone whatsoever who harms them, not just to Christians who harm them. If some Christians really do behave that way, what possible selectionist explanation could there be for that? ‘None, which is why no one believes and behaves that way?’ ‘None, but anyone who behaves that way is crazy?’ If those are the answers, Christians can reply – plausibly – that some non-insane Christians have and do believe and behave that way, so that naturalists just have not explained those beliefs and behaviors.

The point is general. Religious believers of all stripes should worry their belief system is rendered irrational by the naturalistic explanations of religion only if those explanations accurately represent their belief system. Religious believers can reply that, by their own lights, this condition has not been met.

The second reason: they presuppose naturalism is true

It is pretty obvious that religious people and naturalists differ mightily on the interpretation of everyday religious phenomena like praying, reading scripture, or putting money in the collection plate. What is the source of this difference? In Warranted Christian Belief (2000), philosopher Alvin Plantinga suggests disagreement about naturalism itself explains the difference. He says naturalism is a powerful, comprehensive, totalizing worldview, just as Christianity is. It colors everything the naturalist thinks and sees, just as Christianity colors everything the Christian thinks and sees. But in that case, Plantinga argues, Christians should not be too worried that naturalists can explain natuoristically the beliefs and behaviors of Christians. After all, the naturalists are operating with a worldview that, by the lights of the Christian, is just false. Plantinga’s point can be generalized so that it applies to a wider range of religious believers than just Christians.

The underlying picture of rationality Plantinga works with is of humans equipped with cognitive powers or faculties – faculties like reason, memory, self-awareness, and so on. Beliefs are the outputs of these faculties. To be what Plantinga calls ‘warranted’ (a term which, for the purposes of this chapter, we will treat as synonymous with ‘rationally held’ or just ‘rational’ for
short), a belief must be produced by faculties geared toward the production of true belief and operating in the right sort of environment. To use Plantinga’s terminology, the faculties must be ‘properly functioning’. Are the faculties that produce Christian belief functioning properly? According to naturalists, No. They say Christian belief, like all religious belief, is produced by faculties that are either operating in the wrong environment (see (G) above) or are not geared toward the production of true beliefs (see (J) and (M) above). Therefore, the beliefs produced by these faculties are irrational, according to naturalists. Plantinga responds that naturalistic theories of religion show Christian belief is irrational only if naturalism is true. But whether naturalism is or is not true is precisely what naturalists and Christians disagree about. So the fact that naturalists can ‘explain’ Christian belief should not bother Christians unless Christians are given independent reasons to think naturalism is true.

How about the naturalistic explanations of religion themselves? Do they, just by themselves, give Christians reason for thinking naturalism is true? Plantinga addresses an argument from philosopher Philip Quinn that they do (Plantinga 2000: Chapter 11). Quinn said that, since naturalistic theories of religion show that the belief in God would arise in humans even if God does not exist, the hypothesis that God really does exist is ‘explanatorily idle’. Plantinga responds that Christian theism is not put forward as a hypothesis that explains why people believe in God, so Quinn is faulting Christians for failing to do something they do not think they have to do.

This is an important point, so let us illustrate it with two examples. The first is drawn from the history of science. Prior to Isaac Newton, the motion of bodies was explained through a theory developed by the ancient philosopher Aristotle. For Aristotle, any moving body – for example, an arrow shot by an archer – moves because a force (‘impetus’) was imparted to it. As that impetus gets used up, the body slows down and eventually stops. On this view, the natural state for any body is rest, so if a body is not moving, no explanation is needed of why it is not moving. But if a body is moving, then an explanation of its motion is required. Newton showed this was wrong. According to his First Law of Motion, it is uniform (‘inertial’) motion that is natural. If a body is moving at a certain speed in a certain direction, it is natural that it continues to move at that very same speed in that very same direction. (This is why the space probes Voyager 1 and 2 are still moving beyond the solar system nearly forty years after they were launched, despite not being propelled for decades.) Now suppose Aristotelians argue as follows: ‘Our theory is better than Newton’s because our theory explains something Newton’s theory does not: inertial motion.’ This is a bad argument. The reason Newton’s theory cannot explain the First Law of Motion is that the First Law of Motion is an axiom of Newton’s theory. If we want to judge Newton’s theory, we should not ask Newtonians to prove their axioms. We should see how well the total theory helps us explain everything else. On that criterion, Newtonians have great justification for believing the First Law of Motion, since doing so helps them explain all sorts of things the impetus theory cannot – like why Voyager 1 and 2 are still going.

The second example is religious. Many Buddhist monks claim that, when they meditate, they feel one with the universe. Neuroscientist Andrew Newberg has used various imaging technologies to see what is going on in the brains of those monks (www.andrewnewberg.com). He has found that those experiences correlate with decreased activity in the parietal lobe of the brain. Suppose a naturalist tells a Buddhist monk that science explains why meditating Buddhist monks think they are one with the universe, and that this shows Buddhism is irrational. Should the Buddhist monk worry? Well, by the lights of the Buddhist, there is no self that is distinct from the rest of reality. ‘No self’ is one of the core beliefs of the Buddhist – arguably, it is the First Law of Buddhism. It helps Buddhists explain many other things – for example, suffering. The non-existence of the self and the oneness of everything is a starting point for Buddhism. It
is one of the central insights through which all else is explained, just as the First Law of Motion is axiomatic in Newton’s theory. The naturalist is saying naturalism has the advantage over Buddhism because naturalism explains why the Buddhist believes what is, for the Buddhist, a starting point. (Somehow this seems like a very Buddhist insight. When the naturalist says naturalism explains why the Buddhist believes he is one with the universe, the Buddhist should reply that Buddhism explains why the naturalist believes she is separate from the universe.)

These examples indicate that who is winning depends on how we keep score. What appears to naturalists as something demanding an explanation appears to the Christian as not needing any explanation. What is, by the lights of the naturalist, a victory for the naturalist is, by the lights of the Christian, a draw between the naturalist and the Christian. So, by the lights of the Christian, says Plantinga, the naturalist has failed to show Christian belief is irrational. And, as the example of Buddhist meditation indicates, this strategy can be generalized to religions other than Christianity.

The social implications for religious believers of the naturalistic theories

Let us end with some thoughts about the social implications for religious believers of the naturalistic explanations of religion. For many naturalists, there is no longer any point in debating religious believers on their merits. All that remains is to analyze their stubborn resistance (just as Belinda analyzed Alexis’s stubborn adherence to conservatism). The naturalistic theories provide a way for naturalists to do that, and there is nothing religious believers can do to stop them. Naturalists are free to flesh out their worldview as they see fit. When diagnosis turns into the attribution of pathology, however, things get worrisome.

An emerging pattern amongst some naturalists is to talk publicly about religion as a meme infecting the minds of the religious. For example, Kathleen Taylor, a neuroscience writer with a background in philosophy and the author of _The Brain Supremacy_ (2012), recently suggested that religious fundamentalism may soon be classified as a treatable mental illness. ‘Someone who has for example become radicalised to a cult ideology – we might stop seeing that as a personal choice that they have chosen as a result of pure free will and may start treating it as some kind of mental disturbance’, she says (Bennett-Smith 2013). ‘In many ways it could be a very positive thing because there are no doubt beliefs in our society that do a heck of a lot of damage’ – for example, the belief that corporal punishment of children is divinely sanctioned. Notice the meme talk; it is the belief in divinely sanctioned corporal punishment doing the damage, not the people holding the belief.

That belief is one religious meme among many that philosopher Daniel Dennett thinks should be eliminated: ‘[religious believers] who will not accommodate, who will not temper, who insist on keeping only the purest and wildest strain of their heritage alive, we will be obliged, reluctantly, to cage or disarm, and we will do our best to disable the memes they fight for’ (Dennett 1995: 516). The language of memes cleverly detaches the believer from the belief, but unlike real viruses, memes (if they exist at all) do not just float in the air. They reside in human brains and bodies, and there is no way to disable religious memes without, as Dennett admits, caging or disarming religious believers. For religious believers, that is something to worry about.¹

Note

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