

## Naturalistic Explanations of Theistic Belief

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Naturalism denies that there are any spiritual or supernatural realities. There are, that is, no purely mental substances and there are no supernatural realities transcendent to the world; or at least we have no sound grounds for believing that there are such realities or perhaps even for believing that there could be such realities. It is the view that anything that exists is ultimately made up of physical components.

Naturalism sometimes has been reductionistic (claiming that all talk of the mental can be translated into purely physicalist terms) or scientific (claiming that what science cannot tell us humankind cannot know). The more plausible forms of naturalism are neither across-the-board reductionistic nor scientific (Nielsen 1996, ch. 1). Most claims that people make are not scientific; yet they can, for all that, be true or false. Many of them are quite plainly and uncontroversially in place. That it snows in Ontario in winter, that people very frequently fear death, and that keeping promises is generally speaking a desirable thing are some unproblematic examples. And very frequently mentalistic talk in terms of intentions, thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and the like is not only useful, but indispensable if we are to make sense of human life and of the interactions between people. Such remarks are typically true or false and again sometimes unproblematically so. But such talk is, for the most part, hardly scientific, though from this, of course, it does not follow that it is anti-scientific – it is just non-scientific. There we are, however, still talking, under different descriptions, about the same physical realities as we are when we give macroscopic descriptions of bodily movements, though in using the mental terms we are usually talking for a different purpose and from a different perspective. These descriptions are different, and usefully so, but, all the same, only one kind of reality is being described, namely physical reality. There are no *purely* mental realities in a naturalistic account of the world.

Religions, whether theisms or not, are belief-systems (though that is not all that they are) which involve belief in spiritual realities. Even Theravada Buddhism, which has neither God nor worship, has a belief in spiritual realities; this is incompatible with naturalism, as also is theism which is a form of supernaturalism (see Chapter 2, Buddhism). Naturalism, where consistent, is an atheism. It need not be a militant atheism and it should not be dogmatic: it should not claim that it is certain that theism is either false or incoherent. Yet, unlike an agnostic, a naturalist, if she is consistent, will be an atheist arguing, or at least presupposing, that theism is either false or

incoherent or in some other way thoroughly unbelievable. But naturalists will argue for atheism in a fallibilistic, and *sometimes* even in a moderately skeptical, manner: one that is characteristic of modernity or of the peculiar form of modernity that some call postmodernity.

Atheism has a *critical* side and an *explanatory* side. (With many naturalistic theorists, atheists engage in both of these tasks. And sometimes it is not as clear as it should be which they are doing.) The critical side is classically exemplified in the works of Baron d'Holbach, Thomas Hobbes, Pierre Bayle, and most profoundly in those of David Hume, and in our period by the works of (among others) Axel Hägerström, Bertrand Russell, J. L. Mackie, Wallace Matson, Paul Kurtz, Richard Robinson, Ingemar Hedenius, Kai Nielsen, William L. Rowe, Antony Flew (see Chapter 53, The Presumption of Atheism), and Michael Martin (see Chapter 54, The Verificationist Challenge; and Chapter 55, Theism and Incoherence). Such an atheism gives, in one way or another, grounds for the rejection of all belief in supernatural or spiritual beings and with that, of course, a rejection of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam with their common belief in a God who created the universe out of nothing and has absolute sovereignty over his creation (see Chapter 37, Creation and Conservation).

It will also be the case that naturalistic explanations will become of paramount interest only when the critique of theism has been thought to have done its work. Karl Marx's and Sigmund Freud's accounts of religion, as they were themselves well aware, gain the considerable significance they have only after we have come to believe that the Enlightenment critiques of religion by Bayle and Hume, perhaps with a little contemporary rational reconstruction, have successfully done their work. But it is not implausible to think that in our situation, coming down to us from the Enlightenment, there is what in effect is a cumulative argument (more literally a cluster of arguments with many strands and a complex development) against theism that has with time increased in force (Nielsen 1996). Starting with the early Enlightenment figures, finding acute and more fully developed critiques in Hume and Kant (see Chapter 12, Early Modern Philosophical Theology on the Continent; and Chapter 13, Early Modern Philosophical Theology in Great Britain), and carried through by their contemporary rational reconstructers (e.g., Mackie and Martin), the various arguments for the existence of God, including appeals to religious experience (see Chapter 48, Religious Experience), have been so thoroughly refuted that few would try to defend them today and even those few that do, do so in increasingly attenuated forms. The move has increasingly been in religious apologetic to an appeal to faith (see Chapter 52, Fideism; Chapter 19, Wittgenstein; and Chapter 77, Wittgensteinian Philosophy of Religion) or to arguments that claim that without belief in God life would be meaningless or morality groundless (see Chapter 45, Moral Arguments): that is, that naturalism leads to nihilism or despair.

Naturalists in turn point to the fact that such theistic responses do not face the fact that a perfectly reasonable and morally compelling secular sense can be made of morality, that alleged revelations and faiths are many and not infrequently conflicting, and moreover, and distinctively, that the very concept of God is problematical. To turn to the part about problematicity, where the theisms are plainly anthropomorphic, where we have something like a belief in a Zeus-like God, then religious claims are plainly false. Where theisms, by contrast, are more theologically elaborated and the religion,

at least in that sense, is more developed, theistic religions move away from anthropomorphism to a more spiritualistic conception of God, for example, "God is Pure Spirit," "God is not a being but Being as such," "God is the mysterious ground of the universe." But with this turn (an understandable turn for theism to take given the pressure of philosophical thought, science, and secular outlooks) religious claims, though becoming thereby not so clearly, or perhaps not even at all, falsifiable, are threatened with incoherence.

As we move away from anthropomorphism to claims that God is an unlimited, ultimate Being transcendent to the universe, we no longer understand to *whom* or to *what* the term "God" refers. If we try to think literally here we have no hold on the idea of "a being or Being that is transcendent to the universe." And to try to treat it metaphorically is (1) to provoke the question *what* is it a metaphor of, and (2) to lose the putatively substantive nature of the claim. God, in evolved forms of theism, is said to be an infinite individual who created the universe out of nothing and who is distinct from the universe. But such a notion is so problematical as to be at least arguably incoherent (Nielsen 1996, ch. 14). So construed, there could be no standing in the presence of God, no divine encounters, and no experiencing God in our lives. With anthropomorphism we get falsification; without it we get at least apparent incoherence and religious irrelevance.

At the core of theistic belief there is a metaphysical belief in a reality that is alleged to transcend the empirical world. It is the metaphysical belief that there is an eternal (see Chapter 32, Eternity), ever-present, creative source and sustainer of the universe. The problem is how it is possible to know or even reasonably to believe that such a reality exists, or even to understand what such talk is about. Naturalists believe that if we continue to try to see through *Judeo-Christian spectacles*, there is nothing to understand here. We are faced with the hopeless task of trying to make sense out of an incoherent something, we know not what. Yet religious belief, much of which in one way or another is theistic belief, is culturally speaking pervasive even with the continuing disenchantment of the world.

Many contemporary naturalists believe that with the critical work – the critique of the truth-claims of theism – essentially done by Hume, we should turn, setting both metaphysical speculation and fideistic *angst* aside, to naturalistic explanations of religious beliefs. The main players here from the nineteenth century are Ludwig Feuerbach, Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx, Max Stirner, and Friedrich Nietzsche; and from the twentieth century, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Axel Hägerström, Sigmund Freud, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Antonio Gramsci. Their accounts, although varied, are all thoroughly naturalistic.

These naturalists assume that by now it has been well established that there are no sound reasons for religious beliefs: there is no reasonable possibility of establishing religious beliefs to be true; there is no such thing as religious knowledge or sound religious belief. But when there are no good reasons, and when that fact is, as well, tolerably plain to informed and impartial persons, not crippled by ideology or neurosis, and yet religious belief (a belief that is both widespread and tenacious) persists in our cultural life, then it is time to look for the *causes* – causes which are not also reasons – of religious belief, including the causes of its widespread psychological appeal for many people. And indeed, given the importance of religious beliefs in the lives of most

human beings, it is of crucial importance to look for such causes. Here questions about the origin and functions of religion become central, along with questions about the logical or conceptual status of religious beliefs.

Let us see how some of this goes by starting with Feuerbach and then, going to our century, moving on to Freud. (We will later turn to other such naturalists.) For Feuerbach religion is the projected image of humanity's essential nature. To understand what religion properly is, its explanation and elucidation must be taken out of the hands of theology and turned over to anthropology. Feuerbach sees himself, vis-à-vis religion, as changing profoundly the very way things are viewed and reacted to, changing religion's very object, as it is in the believer's imagination, into a conception of the object as it is in reality, namely that God is really the species-being (the idealized essence) of human beings rather than some utterly mysterious supernatural power. To talk about God, for him, is to talk about human beings *so idealized*.

Freud also discusses religion in psychological and anthropological terms. Religion in reality is a kind of mass obsessional delusion; though for understandable and often very emotionally compelling reasons, it is, of course, not recognized as such by believers, or at least not clearly and stably so. What religious beliefs and practices in reality do, according to Freud, is to depress the value of life and distort "the picture of the real world in a delusional manner" – which, Freud has it, comes to "an intimidation of the intelligence." By so functioning, religion has succeeded in "sparing many people an individual neurosis. But hardly anything more" (Freud 1930, pp. 31–2). Religion, on Freud's account, is the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity. It emerges out of the Oedipus complex – out of the helpless child's relation to what understandably seems to the child an all-powerful father. "God," Freud tells us, "is the exalted father and the longing for the father is the root of the need for religion" (Freud 1957, p. 36). Religious beliefs and doctrines "are not the residue of experience or the final result of reflection; they are illusions, fulfillment of the oldest, strongest and most insistent wishes of mankind; the secret of their strength is the strength of these wishes" (p. 51).

In many circumstances of life we are battered and to some considerable extent helpless. Faced with this helplessness, we unconsciously revert to how we felt and reacted as infants and very young children when, quite unavoidably, given the kind of creatures we are, we were subject to a long period of infantile dependence – a period when we were utterly helpless – and, given the sense of security that we need because of this helplessness, we develop a father-longing. We need someone who will protect us. Freud believes that human beings come to believe that this is what the father does. Coming to recognize in later life that our fathers are by no means perfect protectors, nor could they be even with the best of motivations, we, in a world replete with threatening circumstances that we cannot control, unconsciously revert to our infantile attitudes and create the gods (Freud 1957, p. 27). Thus religion functions to exorcize the terrors of nature, to reconcile us to the "cruelty of fate, particularly as shown in death" and to "make amends for the sufferings and privations that the communal life of culture has imposed on man" (p. 27). To speak of God is in reality not to speak, as believers believe, of a supernatural creator and sustainer of the world – there are no such spiritual realities – but of an imagined idealized father, all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good, who deeply cares for us and who can and will protect us (see Chapter 28, Omniscience; Chapter 27, Omnipotence; and Chapter 30, Goodness).

For Feuerbach and Freud religious ideas were about psychological-anthropological realities. There is a stylized, and I believe a misleading, difference (alleged difference) characteristically thought to obtain between them and Engels, Marx, and Durkheim. For the latter, by contrast with Feuerbach and Freud, religion is taken instead to be about *society* – about social realities. For Marx all pre-Communist societies are class societies, driven by class struggles, where the class structures are epoch-specific and are rooted in the material conditions of production. Religions, in his and Engels' conception, function principally to aid the dominant class or classes in mystifying and, through such mystification, controlling the dominated classes in the interests of the dominant class or classes. Members of the dominating classes may or may not be aware that religion functions that way. But, whether they are aware of it or not, it so functions. Religion, as ideology, serves to reconcile the dominated to their condition and to give them an illusory hope of a better purely spiritual world to come, after they depart this vale of tears. This works, in the interests of the dominant class or classes, as a device to pacify what otherwise might be a rebellious dominated class, while at the same time "legitimizing" the wealth and other privileges of the dominating class or classes. In this peculiar way – definitely an ideological way – religion works to "unify" class society, while at the same time giving expression to distinctive class interests. It serves, that is, both to "unify" class society and to sanction class domination, while giving the dominated class an illusory hope of a better life to come after the grave (Marx and Engels 1958; Nielsen 1996, ch. 15).

Durkheim, though in a rather different way, also saw religion as unifying society. In his view, however, it *genuinely* unified society. As Steven Lukes put it, Durkheim "saw religion as social in at least three broad ways: as socially determined, as embodying representations of social realities, and as having functional social consequences" (Lukes 1985, p. 462). In all these ways, talk of God is in reality talk about society, but they are nonetheless different ways and only the part about embodying representations of social realities is *necessarily* naturalistic. However, if a naturalistic turn is taken, questions about the social determination and the social function of religion, rather than questions about the truth of religious beliefs, come to the forefront, gaining a pertinence that they did not have before. Still, (1) questions about what are the causes of religious beliefs and practices and what sustains them, (2) questions about the role they play in the life of human beings, and (3) questions about their truth should be kept apart, though admittedly (1) and (2) are intertwined. But at least initially, they should be held apart in our thinking about them and examined separately.

Durkheim sought to give an utterly naturalistic account of what we are talking about when we speak of God. God and the religious beings of other religious systems "are nothing other than collective states objectified; they are society itself seen under one of its aspects" (Durkheim 1912, p. 590; trans. p. 412). Religion, for him, was a mode of comprehending social realities. To put matters again in a stylized way, while for Freud religious realities were psychological realities and for Feuerbach they were anthropological, they were for Durkheim sociological realities. Two points are relevant here: (1) *all* of these accounts are *reductionistic*, and (2), for Durkheim, in reality, his sociological notions about religion were suffused with psychological notions. There is no keeping these matters apart in the way Durkheim wished to and the way his *conception* of sociology required. (Here his practice was better than his belief about

religious practices.) However, it goes the other way as well. Freud's "psychology of religion" and Feuerbach's anthropological account were also sociological accounts. So with all the figures discussed above we have a social-psychological, sometimes socio-economic, account of the origin of religion, the status of religious ideas, and the function of religion. They, of course, differently emphasize this and that, but they have an underlying common conception of religion. What Lukes says of Durkheim was common to all the above naturalistic theoreticians of religion, namely that, refusing to take religious symbols at what orthodox believers would take to be their face value – to see the world through Judeo-Christian spectacles – they sought "to go 'underneath' the symbol to the reality which it represents and which gives it its 'true meaning' and (they sought to show as well) that all religions 'answer, though in different ways, to the given conditions of human existence'" (Lukes 1985, p. 482).

If such a naturalistic account of religious representations is sound, or at least on its way to being sound via some more sophisticated restatement, we can then appropriately turn our attention to the social and psychological functions of religion: the roles it plays in the lives of human beings. These are things that naturalists have characteristically taken to be at the very heart of the matter in thinking about religion. Our attention turns now, that is, not to questions concerning the truth or coherency of religious beliefs, but to an attempt to understand their role in life, *whether the beliefs themselves are coherent or not*.

We have set out a range of naturalistic explanations of religion. It is frequently argued, or sometimes just rather uncritically believed, that naturalistic explanations of religion in effect, and unavoidably, destroy the very subject matter they are designed to explain. Religion, it is frequently claimed, must be believed to be properly understood. Durkheim's own insight that "whoever does not bring to the study of religion a sort of religious sentiment has no right to speak about it" shows, some believe, that neither his own naturalistic analysis nor any other naturalistic account could be adequate (cited by Lukes 1985, p. 515). No matter how we cut it, religious beliefs, on such an account, are in error, and religious beliefs could have no sound claim to be true. His very explanation (like all naturalistic explanations) is incompatible, where accepted, with the person who accepts it continuing to be a religious believer, if he would be at all consistent. Thus, naturalistic explanations, if correct, or even just widely thought to be correct (on the not implausible assumption that people have some minimal concern with consistency) would undermine religion itself – the very phenomena it purports to explain. Who, a philosopher (Gustave Belot) asked Durkheim, putting forth in discussion with Durkheim what Belot took to be a *reductio*, "would continue to pray if he knew he was praying to no one, but merely addressing a collectivity that was not listening?" Where is the person, Belot went on, who would continue to take part in "communion if he believed that it was no more than a mere symbol and that there was nothing real underlying it?" (cited by Lukes 1985, p. 515). Explanation, given Durkheim's way of going about things, becomes identical with naturalistic critique here, and that very fact, the claim goes, reveals its *explanatory* inadequacy.

The naturalist should respond that it is false to say that there is nothing real underlying religious symbols. There is something there very real indeed – facts about human beings and society – only the reality is not what the believer takes it to be. Rather than its being the case that understanding religion requires belief, understanding religion,

in a genuine way, is incompatible with believing it. Moreover, this secular understanding can be a sensitive empathetic understanding attuned (as Durkheim thought it must be) to the realities of religious experience and sentiment. This is shown most forcefully in the accounts of religious experience and sentiment given by Feuerbach, Hägerström, and Ronald Hepburn. Having a feel for religion does not require having the related belief, but it does require having of a sense of what it is that makes religion so compelling, and so psychologically necessary, for so many people, indeed, historically speaking, for most people.

Naturalistic explanations are, of course, incompatible with religious belief. But they are not *thereby* inadequate explanations. They do not explain religion *away* in explaining or presupposing that religious claims could not be true, for the account explains religion's origins, its *claim* to truth, how that very claim is in error, the depth of that error, its persistence, in spite of that, in various institutional contexts and in the personal lives of human beings, its various cultural and historical forms, how and why it changes and develops as it does, and its continuing persistence and appeal in one or another form. An account which does these things well is a good candidate for a viable conception of religion, yielding an adequate range of explanations of the phenomena of religion. It seems to me that the naturalistic explanations we have discussed, particularly when taken together, do just that.

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