
Naturalistic explanations of religion

KAI NIELSEN

Summary: This article sets out a range of naturalistic explanations of religion. It maintains that what underlies religious symbols are facts about human beings and society which fulfil human social and psychological needs: understanding religion is incompatible with believing it.

Résumé: Cette étude présente plusieurs explications naturalistes de la religion. L'étude soutient que sous les symboles religieux se trouvent des faits concernant les êtres humains et la société qui répondent aux besoins sociaux et psychologiques des êtres humains. Comprendre la religion est incompatible avec la croyance.

1

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. 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. Most claims that we make are not scientific claims, yet they can, for all of 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, that keeping promises is generally speaking a desirable thing are some unproblematic examples. And very frequently mentalistic talk in

Kai Nielsen (1800 boulevard Pie IX, Montreal, QC H1V 2C6) is Professor Emeritus, University of Calgary, and Adjunct Professor, Concordia University.

Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses 26/4 (1997): 441-66

© 1997 Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion / Corporation Canadienne des Sciences Religieuses

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. And such remarks are typically true or false and, again, sometimes unproblematically so. But it is, for the most part, hardly scientific talk, though from this, of course, it does not follow that it is anti-scientific talk. It is just non-scientific. But there we are still talking about, under different descriptions, the same physical realities as we are when we give macroscopic descriptions of bodily movements, though in using mental terms we are usually talking for a different purpose. These descriptions are different, and usefully so, but, all the same, only one kind of reality is being described, namely, physical realities. There are no purely mental realities—realities independent of physical realities—in a naturalistic account of the world.

Religions, whether theisms or not, are belief-systems (though this is not all they are) which involve belief in spiritual realities.¹ Even Buddhism, which has neither God nor worship, has a belief in what Buddhists take to be spiritual realities and this is incompatible with naturalism as is theism as well, which, at least as usually understood, is a form of supernaturalism. 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 a naturalist, if she is consistent, will not be an agnostic, but will be an atheist arguing, or at least presupposing, that theism is either false or incoherent or in some other way unbelievable. Naturalism, that is, is incompatible with belief in God or

1 I do not say, or give to understand, that religion is essentially doctrine. Indeed, there is an important difference between living a religious life and believing a religious doctrine. The former is plainly much more important than the latter. Still, we cannot have the former without something of the latter. In some religions doctrine is more important than in others. But there are no "doctrineless religions"—not even Zen Buddhism—even though the crucial point of religious doctrine is to help structure and facilitate the religious life. But, all the same, what is most fundamental in being religious is to live a religious life. Doctrine is in service of that and sometimes it fails and in reality gets in the way. Still, there is no religious life without religious doctrine. (See also note 8.) Naturalistic accounts need not, and indeed should not, deny the reality and the import of the fact that what is most fundamental in religion is the religious life. Where these naturalistic accounts run deep, as in Feuerbach and Hågerström, they look closely at how the religious life grips, or at least deeply effects, people: how it, not infrequently, powerfully takes hold of their lives. This was exactly what Marx, Gramsci, Durkheim and Malinowski did. The thrust of the latter part of this essay is to show that naturalism neither by definition, nor in any other way, tries to rule out the significance of religious life as found in religious ceremonies and other practices and otherwise, and sometimes very intensely, in the very personal lives of people. It does, however, see them in a different way than they are seen from inside religion. It is, however, question-begging and tendentious to assume that the participant's point of view is always the more adequate point of view. It may be where we start, but it need not be our end point.

a belief that God exists; so naturalists cannot be agnostics, saying, as agnostics do, that we do not know, or perhaps even cannot know, whether or not God does or does not exist. In accepting naturalism, a naturalist is also accepting that there is no God. But naturalists, if they are reasonable, will argue for atheism in a fallibilistic, and sometimes even in a moderately sceptical, manner: a manner that is characteristic of modernity including that peculiar form of modernity that some call postmodernity. A naturalist need not be a sceptic (indeed cannot be a sceptic through and through) though she can be, as Hume was, a limited and moderate sceptic. It should also be noted that a sceptic, limited or otherwise, need not be a naturalist, atheist or even an agnostic as the fideistic stances of Pascal and Kierkegaard brilliantly exemplify. But, whether a limited sceptic or not, a naturalist, if she is reasonable, will be a fallibilist, but, that notwithstanding, still an atheist. "Dogmatic atheism" is not a pleonasm and "fallibilistic atheism" is not an oxymoron.²

Atheism has a critical side and an explanatory side. The critical side is exemplified in the works of d'Holbach and classically most profoundly in Hume and in our period by (among others) Axel Hägerström, Bertrand Russell, Paul Edwards, J. L. Mackie, Wallace Matson, Paul Kurtz, Richard Robinson, Antony Flew, Ingemar Hedenius, Kai Nielsen and Michael Martin. Such an atheism gives grounds, in one way or another, for the rejection of all belief in supernatural or spiritual beings and with that, of course, Judaism, Christianity and Islam with their common belief in God who created the universe out of nothing and has absolute sovereignty over creation.

Most naturalists also reject the conception, common to such theisms, where they are even remotely orthodox, that human beings are sinful, utterly dependent on God and can only make adequate sense of their lives by accepting without question God's ordinances for them. Naturalists reject that conception of human beings as well as the distinctive morality that goes with it. They believe that people can make sense of their lives and reasonably order their lives as moral beings without any belief in God or any other spiritual realities.

Critique and explanation are distinct and naturalists characteristically engage in both. But some kinds of explanation, as we shall see, if successful, are also critiques of religious belief and practice. People who, as Robin Horton puts it, see the world through Judaeo-Christian spectacles are inclined to believe that naturalistic explanations of theistic belief explain

² See my "Atheism without Anger or Tears," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, 23 (1994): 193-209. For a fuller statement see my *Naturalism without Foundations* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Press, 1996).

religion by explaining religion away and are superficial to boot.³ Some of them, not unsurprisingly, are (Baron d'Holbach's and Bertrand Russell's, for example), but others are not (Ludwig Feuerbach's and Émile Durkheim's, for example).

A naturalistic conception of religion will explain religion as a function of human needs and of the conditions of life which give rise to those needs. But it should be asked what (if anything) would constitute an adequate naturalistic explanation of religion? Here Marx Wartofsky well remarks that a "viable conception of religion is one which doesn't explain religion away, but rather explains its origins, its distinctive cultural and historical forms, its persistence in various institutions, its changing contexts and development, its continuing and present existence in the modes of belief and action of individuals."⁴ To this it should be added that it needs, as well, to explain its extensive resilience in a deeply secularized world where, in Max Weber's phrase, the disenchantment of the world has, and for some time now, cut deeply and pervasively into our lives.

Some will say that no naturalistic conception can be fully adequate, for we cannot understand the reality of religion in such a neutral spectator's way. Only those who have actually experienced the reality of God, have felt for themselves the awe and dread of God's presence, can understand the reality of what is being talked about. But this is false or at the very least question-begging. Rudolph Otto, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Martin Buber give us, from within a theistic perspective, deep and compelling accounts of religious *experience*—of the sense of the presence of God—but, after all, what we actually have here are psychological descriptions of the experiential life of some human beings. Moreover, two naturalistic philosophers, Axel Hägerström and Ronald Hepburn, have, turning to those accounts and extending them in a sensitive way, given us explicitly naturalistic accounts of religious experience and religious sensibilities.⁵ Just as it is not necessary to be neurotic to understand neurotics, so it is not necessary to be religious to understand religious experience, though it may be true that someone who has never felt the power of a neurotic response will not be likely to understand very deeply neuroses and that someone who has never been caught up in a religious life, as both Hägerström and Hepburn once were, will not be very likely to have a deep

3 Robin Hortin, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 101-93.

4 Marx Wartofsky, "Homo Homini Deus Est: Feuerbach's Religious Materialism," in L. S. Rouner, ed., *Meaning, Truth, and God* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1982), p. 154-73.

5 Axel Hägerström, *Religionsfilosofi* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1949); Axel Hägerström, *Philosophy and Religion*, translated by P. T. Sandin (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964); and Ronald Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox* (London: Watts, 1958).

understanding of religious experience or sentiment. Without that experience and without having been deeply involved in a religious life, they are likely to have a tin ear for religious experience. But there are plenty of religiously sensitive ex-religious believers who once were deeply committed religiously who understand religious experience perfectly well. Not all naturalists have a tin ear for religion.

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. Marx's, Freud's and Durkheim's accounts of religion, as they were themselves well aware, become most significant for religion, and more generally most normatively and critically significant, after we have come to believe, if we have come to believe, that the Enlightenment critiques of religion by Bayle and Hume, perhaps with a little contemporary rational reconstruction, are sound and even fairly unproblematically so. But it is not implausible to think that in our situation, coming down to us from the Enlightenment, there is, and best set in a historical narrative, 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. Starting with the early Enlightenment figures, finding acute and more fully developed critiques in Hume and Kant, 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) have been so thoroughly refuted that few would try to defend them today and even those few that do so do so in increasingly attenuated forms. The move has increasingly been in religious apologetic to an appeal to faith and to arguments that claim that without belief in God life would be meaningless and morality groundless: that naturalism leads to nihilism or despair.⁶ That fideistic reaction was in the century before ours—to take a key example—a very prominent phenomenon in Russian social life of certain leisured and educated strata, deeply alienated in their useless lives. This is forcefully depicted in the writings of Dostoevsky, Turgenev and Chekhov.

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 not unproblematical. Where, to turn to the latter, the theisms are plainly anthropomorphic, where we have something like a belief in a Zeus-like God, then religious claims are plainly

6 Terence Penelhum, "Fideism," in P. L. Quinn and C. Taliaferro, eds., *A Companion to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), and John Hyman, "Wittgensteinianism," in Quinn and Taliaferro, eds., *A Companion to the Philosophy of Religion*.

false. Where theisms are more theologically ramified and the religion, at least in that sense, is more developed, theistic religions move away from animism to a more spiritualistic conception of God, e.g., "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 science and secular outlooks) religious claims, though becoming thereby not so clearly, or perhaps not even at all, falsifiable, are threatened with incoherence.⁷

As we move away from anthropomorphism to claims that God is 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 (a) to provoke the question what is it a metaphor of and (b) 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.⁸ So construed, there could be no standing in

7 Michael Martin, "The Verificationist Challenge," in Quinn and Taliaferro, eds., *A Companion to the Philosophy of Religion*.

8 A reader has objected that I just dogmatically assert that religious beliefs are incoherent and that I compound that error by just assuming incorrectly that what is coherent and what is not is context-independent. But in Part 1, I argue, perhaps both unconvincingly and incorrectly, for the incoherence of non-anthropomorphic religious conceptions, though I do assume it in Parts 2, 3 and 4. But they build on what I argue in Part 1. Moreover, I have argued in detail, again perhaps unconvincingly and incorrectly, for this incoherence thesis in a series of books. See my *Contemporary Critiques of Religion* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971); *Scepticism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973); *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1982); *God, Scepticism and Modernity* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1989); with Hendrik Hart, *Search for Community in a Withering Tradition: Conversations between a Marxian Atheist and a Calvinist Christian* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990); and *Naturalism without Foundations*. I also explicitly stress there the context-dependence of concepts of incoherence, but argue against the balkanization of religious concepts and religious language-games. We should start, in analyzing religious beliefs, with religious practices and the use of religious utterances as they stand in such religious contexts. But religious discourse is intertwined with other uses of language. When we see how they are related, how they fit together, and reflect carefully on the uses of religious terms and sentences in their live contexts in religious practices and as part of some natural language (e.g., French or English), they seem at least to be incoherent. Referring expressions such as "God" or "heaven" occur in them, but we have no idea of how to specify, even taking them in context, their referents; some key religious utterances appear to be in some sense factual cosmological (itself a pleonasm) assertions—at least in their surface grammar—but we cannot specify their truth-conditions or their assertability-conditions; there are key religious utterances that some say we must understand metaphorically or symbolically, but we cannot say what they are metaphors or symbols of. But there is no just *only* understanding them metaphorically

the presence of God, no divine encounters and no experiencing God in our lives. With anthropomorphism we get falsification and superstition—God is taken to be some mysterious and elusive entity or existent; without anthropomorphism, where God is said not to exist, i.e., to not be an existent, but to be eternal Ultimate Being, we get at least apparent incoherence.

Some theists have responded that the word “God” (and, of course, cognates in other languages) can be taught—can be given sense—by the use of definite descriptions such as “the first cause,” “the sole ultimate reality” and the like. But these alleged descriptions are as problematical as the term “God” itself, for the key terms in such *putative* descriptions are themselves very good candidates for incoherence. We neither know (what “self-caused being,” “eternal utterly independent being,” “maker of the universe” or “first cause” refer to nor do we in any other way understand what they *mean*. We do not know how to use them in sentences which make claims which have either truth-conditions or assertability-conditions.⁹ They are just as puzzling as “God” or “eternal Ultimate Being” and appeal to them will not help us to come to understand what we are talking about when we speak of God. They are, many naturalists argue, grand but empty phrases without a determinate meaning.¹⁰ To say that they refer to an ultimate mystery is just an evasive way of saying that we do not understand them. It in reality is just arm waving.

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, ever-present, creative source and sustainer

or symbolically. To be either a metaphor or a symbol they must be a metaphor or a symbol of something. Metaphorical and symbolic use is logically parasitic on literal use. And do not say there are no literal uses to be contrasted with metaphorical uses. There is a big difference between “Hitler had a black moustache” and “Hitler had a black soul.” In fine, religious-talk is *so short on sense* that the claim of incoherence seems at least to be apposite. Stated so succinctly these claims may seem dogmatic. I hope *seems* is not *is* here. I have argued these points in detail and with care in the books mentioned earlier in this note, hoping at the very least to have avoided dogmatism and sheer assertion. In *Naturalism without Foundations* I argue most fully the point about contextuality.

9 Naturalism—or at least my naturalism and the naturalisms of other pragmatists—does not use “language police.” It does not set forth (like Rudolf Carnap or Alfred Tarski) a model of an ideal language, but takes language as it comes, including, of course, its practice-embedded religious-talk. It does not require that defenders of religious life put their experiences, practices and sense of life into some prescribed narrow “empirical language” or “scientific language”—something that in reality does not exist and there is no good reason at all to think that it could be constructed. Nothing even remotely like that is involved in my account. I mention this because a reviewer of this essay somehow thought, in a way that utterly baffles me, that this was what I was doing or at least assuming.

10 Hägerström, *Philosophy and Religion*.

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 ("empirical world" may well be a redundancy). Naturalists believe that if we continue to try to see through Judaeo-Christian spectacles that 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 some way or other, is theistic belief, is culturally speaking pervasive even with the continuing disenchantment of the world.

The response of Reformed Philosophers—philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff—philosophizing out of a Calvinist tradition, is that these alleged difficulties can legitimately be set aside. Believers have just as much right to believe in God without grounds or philosophical articulation as naturalistic philosophers (or for that matter anyone else) have a right to believe in the external world or in other minds, matters which, Reformed philosophers claim, cannot be evidentially or argumentatively established either.¹¹ But such a response, currently popular though it be in some circles, is, for at least three reasons, off the mark. Belief in God is not pervasively accepted across cultures in the way that belief in other-minds and the external world is; there can be no just relying on some putative revelation for they are many and frequently conflicting and we have no basis for picking out the real thing from the merely putative. Moreover, the appeal to such a basis paradoxically takes us away, if we think about it a little, from a straight appeal to revelation as the basis for belief. For we need criteria, independently of the alleged revelation, to judge whether a putative revelation is a genuine revelation. Finally, and thirdly, as we have already seen, there are questions about the very intelligibility of talk of God in a way that there is not about the external world or about other-minds. The idea that anthropologists might, and indeed actually do, come across cultures without a belief in God is a commonplace; the idea that anthropologists might come across a culture that does not believe that there is an external world or other minds is a patent absurdity.¹²

2

So with the critical work (the critique of the truth-claims of theism) essentially done by Hume, we should set both metaphysical speculation and fideistic *angst* aside and turn to naturalistic explanations of religious belief. The main players here from the 19th century are Ludwig Feuer-

11 Alvin Plantinga, "Reformed Epistemology," and N. Wolterstorff, "The Reformed Tradition," both in Quinn and Taliaferro, eds., *A Companion to the Philosophy of Religion*.

12 Nielsen, *Naturalism without Foundations*, p. 79-89, 119-39, 153-54 and 445.

bach, Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx, Max Stirner and Friedrich Nietzsche and, from the 20th century, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Axel Hägerström, Sigmund Freud, Bronislaw Malinowski and Antonio Gramsci. Their accounts, varied though they are, are all thoroughly naturalistic.

These naturalists assume that by now it has been well established that there are no sound reasons for religious belief: 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 for religious belief and that that is so is, as well, tolerably plain to informed and impartial persons not crippled by ideology or neurosis, and yet religious belief, belief that is both widespread and tenacious, persists in our cultural life, then it is time to look for the *causes* of religious beliefs: causes which are not also reasons justifying religious belief. 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 and indeed to find them, if we can. Here questions about the origin and functions of religion become central, along (though somewhat less centrally) 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 requires that explanation and elucidation be taken out of the hands of theology and turned over to anthropology. Even more iconoclastically, Feuerbach boldly asserts that theology must be reduced to anthropology. Feuerbach sees himself, *vis-à-vis* religion, as engaged in changing in a profound way the very way things are viewed, 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 unwaveringly so. That would be altogether too threatening. 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 had it, comes to "an intimidation of the intelligence." By so functioning, religion has succeed in "sparing many people an individual neurosis. But hardly anything more."¹³ Religion, on Freud's

13 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, translated by W. D. Robson-Scott (London: Hogarth Press, 1930), p. 31-32.

account, is the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity. It emerges out of the Oedipus complex—out of the helpless child's relation to what 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."¹⁴ Religious beliefs and doctrines "are not the residue of experience or the final result of reflection; they are illusions, fulfilments of the oldest, strongest and most insistent wishes of mankind; the secret of their strength is the strength of these wishes."¹⁵

In many circumstances in life we are battered and helpless. Faced with this helplessness, we unconsciously revert to how we felt and reacted as infants and as very young children where quite unavoidably we were subject to a long period of infantile dependence—a period where we are utterly helpless—and, given the sense of security we need because of this helplessness, we develop a father-longing. We need at that tender age someone who will protect us. Freud believes that human beings initially come to believe that this is what the father does. We come to recognize in later life that our fathers are by no means perfect protectors, nor could they be, even with the best motivations. In a world replete with threatening circumstances that we cannot control and not infrequently only imperfectly understand, we, unconsciously reverting to our infantile attitudes, create the gods.¹⁶ Thus religion functions to exorcise 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 communal life of culture has imposed on man."¹⁷ 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.

For Feuerbach and Freud religious ideas are 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 "historical" societies are class societies, driven by class struggles, where the class structures are epoch-specific and rooted in the material conditions of production. Religion, on his conception, and Engels' conception of things as well, func-

14 Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, translated by W. D. Robson-Scott (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957), p. 36.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

17 *Ibid.*

tions principally to aid the dominant class or classes in mystifying and, through such mystification, helping to control the dominated classes in the interests of the dominant class or classes. 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 typically 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 both to “unify” class society and to sanctify class domination, while giving the dominated class an illusory hope—though, of course, not one seen by them to be illusory—of a better life to come after the grave.¹⁸

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.”¹⁹ In all these ways, talk of God is in reality talk about society, but they are different ways and only the part about embodying representations of social realities, as E. P. Evans-Pritchard, among others, noted, is *necessarily* naturalistic.²⁰ However, if a naturalistic turn is taken, questions about social determination and the social function of religion, rather than questions about the truth of religious beliefs, come to the forefront where they gain a pertinence that they did not have before. Still, questions about (a) what are the causes of religious beliefs and practices and what sustains them, (b) questions about the role they play in the life of human beings, and (c) questions about their truth should be kept apart, though admittedly (a) and (b) are intertwined. But at least initially, they should be held apart, as they can be conceptually in our thinking about them, and examined separately. Durkheim, like Marx and Freud, and like Feuerbach before them, believed, as we have already remarked, that earlier thinkers of the Enlightenment had established that religious beliefs make no sound truth-claims. Against this background, with his distinctive account of how religion embodies representations of social realities, Durkheim sought to give an utterly naturalistic account of what we are talking about, since we cannot, he has it, reasonably take religious beliefs at face value. But, with his distinctive

18 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion*, translator not recorded (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1958), and Nielsen, *Naturalism without Foundations*, chap. 15.

19 Steven Lukes, *Emile Durkheim* (London: Penguin Press, 1985), p. 462.

20 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).

account of how religion embodied representations of social realities, Durkheim sought to give an utterly naturalistic account of what we are talking about when we speak of God. God and the other religious beings of other religious systems "are aspects of society."²¹ Religion, for him, was a mode of comprehending social realities. As Lukes well put it, Durkheim saw religion "as a sort of mythological sociology."²²

To put matters in a stylized way once more, while for Freud religious realities were psychological realities and for Feuerbach they were anthropological, for Durkheim they were sociological realities. Two points are relevant here, both made by Evans-Pritchard, among others: (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 and as his conception of sociology required. (Here his practice was better than his beliefs about his practice.) 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 (Marx and Engels included) we have a social psychological, socio-economic account of the origin of religion, the status of religious ideas and the functions 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. They refused to take religious symbols at what orthodox believers would take to be their face value; they refused to see, in the case of the theisms, the world through Judaeo-Christian spectacles. They sought instead "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.'"²³

Religious believers of the monotheistic sort as part of their religious life sometimes utter utterances like the following: (1) "God is my creator and sustainer upon whom I am utterly dependent," (2) "God is an awesome and fearsome judge," (3) "God is the ineffable Holy One who alone is worthy of worship" or (4) "God is the supreme source of goodness." In trying to give a naturalistic account of the meaning of these utterances and of the referents of their key terms, a naturalistic intellectualist cognitive account will not do. A naturalistic rendition of (2), for example, as "I

21 Émile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris: Alcan 1912); Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, translated by J. A. Swain (London: Allen & Unwin, 1915).

22 Lukes, *Emile Durkheim*.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 482.

feel as if an imaginary and fearsome father were judging me" is not going to do as an account of the meaning or use of (2), for "I feel as if an imaginary and fearsome father were judging me but all the same I know there is no God" is neither a deviation from a linguistic regularity nor is it a contradiction. In that rather straightforward way without such "translations" or renderings it, like a lot of other bits of religious-talk, makes sense: makes sense, that is, if we do not think, rather carefully, about what we are trying to say. Still, coherent or not, such talk has a use (a function) in the language. Similarly with (1) "I feel utterly dependent but there is no God upon whom I can depend" makes sense, in that minimal sense, i.e., it has a use in the language, but it would not meet religious expectations (deep and pervasive religious expectations) if "God" were taken to be equivalent to "the believer has feelings of utter dependence." Indeed, it would not even make the minimal sense that (1) has, for on that naturalistic understanding of "God," (1) would be "translated" as "I feel utterly dependent, but I do not feel utterly dependent." Such naturalistic "translations" or "renderings" are not even remotely plausible for the standard Moorean naturalistic fallacy reasons, i.e., Moore's open-question argument and his non-contradiction argument, deployed in his attack on what he took to be ethical naturalism.²⁴

Recognition of this has led to what among anthropologists²⁵ has been called a symbolist account of religious-talk and what has been called non-cognitive (expressive-evocative or performatory) accounts by philosophers. According to such accounts, in uttering such utterances as (1) to (4) above, religious believers, whether they realize it or not, are doing something performative: they are expressing certain of their deepest feelings, feelings connected with certain life orientations, and, in the very uttering of these utterances, tending, as well, to evoke similar emotions, reaffirming or leading to similar life orientations in others. This expressive-evocative approach is more plausible than a purely intellectualistic naturalism, yet it also leaves out something vital that intellectualist accounts try unsuccessfully to capture, namely, the alleged (intended) cognitive cosmological claim—the putatively factual assertions with their mysterious alleged propositional content—that many religious believers believe obtains when they utter certain key religious utterances. "My Lord and my God" may very well be purely expressive-evocative, but the sample religious utterances quoted above are thought by believers and by

24 G. E. Moore, "The Value of Religion," *Ethics*, 12, 1 (1901): 81-98. See also Jocelyne Couture and Kai Nielsen, "Introduction: The Ages of Metaethics," in Jocelyne Couture and Kai Nielsen, eds., *New Essays on Metaethics* (Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 1995), p. 1-30.

25 Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 106-10, 118-37, 365-66.

some non-believers to do something else as well; "God created the heavens and the earth" and "God providentially orders the world" are also so thought of by such persons. Expressive-evocative they are, but they also are taken to be cognitive claims (truth-claims or assertability-claims allegedly with truth-conditions or assertability-conditions) about a mysterious, scarcely understandable power allegedly external to the world.²⁶ But this, in reality, is a mystification. But, all the same, that claim cannot be given up by religious believers without radically transforming our understanding of such religious utterances from something they have been taken to be throughout their history into something very different. Some religious persons may want to make that radical rupture. But then it is vital to see exactly what is being done: to see, that is, how very deep the rupture is and how far it departs from the core tradition of our theistic religions.²⁷

Such considerations lead, if thought through, to what I shall call the error-theory of religious discourse, an account parallel to what J. L. Mackie called an error-theory of moral discourse.²⁸ Edward Westermarck and Mackie have developed it for morals and Mackie argues that Hume, in effect, had such an account as well. It also has been extensively developed for morality, law and religion, though not under that label, by the Swedish philosopher Axel Hägerström (as well as by other Scandinavian theorists extensively influenced by him) and is, I believe, *implicit* in Feuerbach, Durkheim and Freud.

For moral discourse it goes like this: in uttering (sincerely avowing) moral utterances orthodox believers in morals try to assert, indeed *think*

26 Kai Nielsen, "On Speaking of God," *Theoria*, 28 (1962): 110-37.

27 One reviewer comments: to be sure religion has been all of the things naturalists claim, from being a psychological crutch to supporting a class system of a particular economic era. But what naturalists fail to see, he also asserts, is that there is more to religion than what this allows. Its spiritual practices are sometimes transformational enabling *some* religious persons to live more authentic and more complete lives than *some* people who are not religious. But many naturalists, including this naturalist, acknowledge this and some (Durkheim, Malinowski, Gramsci and Fromm) stress it, explain it and show its rationale in utterly naturalistic terms. Moreover, the opposite is also true. The ways of living and conceiving of things of *some* atheistical people enable them to live more authentic and complete lives than *some* people who are religious. Utterly secular practices can be transformational too. The more crucial question is whether we can say with any objectivity which practices *at their best* are the most adequate transformations. (It is a separate question whether we have adequate criteria for "best" or "most adequate" practices in such domains or any domain. A ruling assumption of this essay is that we do.) And again, and again distinctly, we should reflect on the fact (or at least the putative fact), stressed at the end of the first note, that the participant's point of view is not necessarily the superior point of view.

28 J. L. Mackie, "A Refutation of Morals," *The Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy*, 24 (1946): 77-90, and J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977).

they are asserting, the existence of distinctively prescriptive (normative) properties as well as expressing and evoking emotions (principally approbations and disapprobations). But in reality there are, and indeed can be, no such properties, no such objective and categorical prescriptivities. There are only natural (non-normative) properties and the attitudes we take to them and to certain states of affairs of which these natural properties are properties and to the actions these attitudes generate. Believers in morals have a metaphysical belief *about* their moral beliefs, and thus a meta-ethical belief, as well, that is literally incoherent. They believe that there is some mysterious categorical prescriptivity somehow inherent in things (including human actions) or that, supervening on natural properties, there are non-natural properties that are inherently or intrinsically prescriptive. But such metaphysical conceptions are themselves incoherent.²⁹ There are only natural properties (actually a pleonasm) and events, actions, states of affairs, and the like, toward which human beings have certain attitudes and take certain stances. The normativity that gives life to morality—that makes morality possible—comes in through our emotions or attitudes and is expressed linguistically by the expressive-evocative nature of moral language. Normativity in reality, though not in the beliefs *about* normativity of many people, is a matter of feelings and attitudes. It is not something there to be discovered as a property of actions or things. What we actually have are states of affairs (purely empirical matters), attitudes toward those states of affairs, and the actions generated by these attitudes. There is no metaphysical-normative-something we know not what. There is no categorical prescriptivity just somehow inherent either in the world or in “the supernatural world.” To believe that there is, error-theorists have it, is the pervasive error of orthodox “believers in morals,” which error-theorists take to be most of humankind and not just a few metaphysically inclined philosophers.³⁰

We have those states of affairs, attitudes and actions, plus, for many people (standard believers in morals), a mistaken meta-belief *about* morality, namely, that there are some mysterious non-natural “objective” properties which give moral beliefs an objectivity and authority that is not captured by even the most informed reflective intersubjectivity that could be gained by getting our beliefs, attitudes and commitments to act in certain ways into wide and general reflective equilibrium: in short, into the

29 Mackie would say false. However, since we have no idea of what it would be like to use such conceptions to make true statements and thus, keeping in mind the necessity of a non-vacuous contrast here, we have no idea of what it would be like for them to make false statements either. This being so, it is better to speak of incoherence here. See Antony Flew, “The Burden of Proof,” in L. S. Rouser, ed., *Knowing Religiously* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), p. 103-15.

30 Mackie, “A Refutation of Morals.”

most coherent, consistently related and complete patterning that we can for a time forge of our various beliefs, attitudes, principles, the factual information available and generally accepted scientific (including social scientific) theories available to us at a given time. This comes to the most complete holistic explanation and justification that we can for a time garner.³¹ However, the starkly contrasting orthodox non-intersubjective, or at least allegedly somehow “more than intersubjective” in effect metaphysical conception of objectivity is what standard (if you will, orthodox) believers in morals just *assume*. It is this, they believe, that is “real objectivity” (what I would take to be a *reified* conception of objectivity), a conception of objectivity that is very different than the coherentist, intersubjective consensus gained in even a very wide and general reflective equilibrium. But such a reified conception of objectivity with its linked conception about norms and their justifiability is in error, albeit a powerful and gripping error, an error unwittingly made, Mackie believes, by the vast majority of people. Our very common sense, Mackie claims, contains this incoherent, or at least false, metaphysical belief. Indeed our common sense concerning such matters is suffused with this mystification. He sees it as an error pervasive among human beings that has become built into many very entrenched expectations about our very first-order moral discourse and belief. But, however psychologically understandable it is, it is still an incoherence or at least a false belief *about* morality. But, since the incoherence or falsity is in the meta-belief, it does not, at least where the incoherence or falsity is not noted, normally impede the smooth, or allegedly smooth, functioning of moral discourse.³²

A similar error-theory argument for religious discourse and belief can be articulated. Consider the somewhat long-winded utterance, “God is my redeemer before whose awesome and fearsome presence I stand in fear and trembling, and upon whom I am utterly dependent, a being whom I love and before whom I also stand in longing for a transformative communion with him, the source of all goodness, holiness and, as well, a mysterious ultimate reality beyond my sinful understanding.” This mouthful is a rather clumsy expressive-evocative utterance, but it contains, as well, an abundance of putative cosmological claims: putative knowledge claims about what the universe is like, about what the human condition is in this universe and about what “lives beyond” the universe. The utterance does express feelings of awe, fear, dependency, love, longing for communion

31 John Rawls, “Reply to Habermas,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 92, 3 (March 1995): 132-80; Norman Daniels, *Justice and Justification: Reflective Equilibrium in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Nielsen, *Naturalism without Foundations*.

32 Perhaps it would be better to speak of the alleged and hoped-for coherence. There is a lot of cognitive and other dissonance in moral talk and conception.

and a *sense* of mystery, holiness, righteousness and goodness, with the feelings these conceptions are expressive and evocative of, and, with it being the case as well, that the utterance tends to function to evoke similar feelings in others, if they are attuned to religion. But in addition to that the believer, who sincerely utters this utterance, also has a strange belief *about* the source of these feelings, namely, that it is a mysterious supernatural power, somehow purely spiritual in nature, yet all powerful, all knowing and all good, who is the creator and sustainer of the universe. But it is this belief *about* what the believer utters that is incoherent. This meta-belief, if you will, makes no sense at all.

Just as believers in morals, to remain reasonably orthodox believers in morals, must have some incoherent conception of a categorical prescriptivity inherent in the world to give them the sense of unconsciously reified objectivity they so much—though not under that description—desire, so the believers in God must have an incoherent meta-belief in a supernatural something somehow beyond and independent of the universe to give them a similar sense of “religious objectivity,” when in reality all that is being talked about are the conditions of human existence: Feuerbach’s anthropology and Durkheim’s mythical sociology. For Jewish, Christian and Islamic discourse successfully to function expressively and evocatively, believers must have this incoherent belief in a supernatural power. (They must, of course, not recognize that it is incoherent.) That mystified, and mystifying, belief is absolutely essential for religious believing. If religious believers give it up, given what these religions have been, they cease to be Jewish, Christian or Islamic believers.³³ Hence, the persistent and, it seems

33 Some have argued that I put too much stress on reflective activity and take it as the primary thing in our lives. But I have never done that. It is not, I agree, the primary thing, though it is not nothing either. To think that it is the primary thing would be an absurd rationalistic prejudice. Consider the Zen saying “If one is truly religious one has no need for religion.” I am, the argument goes, with my philosopher’s preconceptions, blind to a fact that many who are themselves believers miss, as Kierkegaard among others so perceptively saw, namely, *the religious life*. Some of them, if they are a certain kind of intellectual, even construct great philosophical mansions (e.g., Hegel and Schelling) while living in a religious shack. And many who are in fact—or so it is said—deeply religious do not claim to be. They have no religious doctrine. There is both truth and falsity here. Truth in that there are people who are not believers (do not believe in God or any of the other religious entities or accept any religious conceptions, or, in some instances, they cannot even make coherent sense of them) who still have some of the key *attitudes* of people who are religious. They have what Paul Tillich called ultimate commitments and concerns and, as Kierkegaard stressed, a certain sort of inwardness, while still having no belief at all in “the ground of being and meaning” which is supposed to be for theologians like Tillich the *proper* object of ultimate concern and commitment. Indeed, such secularist “believers” may not—and perhaps with good reason—have any understanding of such talk. In *that* sense Spinoza, Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, Russell and Einstein were religious. I would very much prize being thought to be religious, and actually to be religious, in *that* sense.

to me, rather desperately ineffective attacks by Reformed epistemologists and other orthodox religious theoreticians on claims made by some naturalists concerning the incoherence of theistic conceptions. This is a point on which believers, if they are even within a country mile of orthodoxy, cannot yield. For, if they yield that, their faith becomes plainly irrational. So we need both to account for that incoherence and to explain what the believer's belief is really about in an utterly naturalistic manner. An error-theory of religion, parallel to the error-theory of morality, does just that. (For non-theistic religions it would have to take a somewhat different form.)

This error-theory of religion comports very well with the following key remark of Durkheim: "As long as science has not come to explain it to them, men know very well that they are acted upon, but they do not know by what. So they must invent by themselves the idea of these powers with which they feel themselves in connection."³⁴ Religion, Durkheim also

And indeed I hope, and even think, I am in *that* sense religious. It is important, I say moralistically but I think rightly, speaking in my own voice, to have the inwardness of which Kierkegaard spoke and to have a strong sense of commitment and concern. (I would rather not qualify these notions with "ultimate," for I do not understand what such a notion comes to. I expect that, *if* it comes to anything very intelligible at all, it must be tied up with some strong form of foundationalism: itself a conception that is very problematical. For the point about foundationalism see my *On Transforming Philosophy: A Metaphysical Inquiry* [Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995], Part 2.) We are lucky if we have it. Indeed that is something to which I aspire. But in *that sense* to be religious is just to have that inwardness and to be a deeply concerned and committed person. But those things—vital as they are to our very humanness—are as open to an atheist as to anyone else. All that notwithstanding, though some atheists, if they are lucky, may themselves be such people, it is not *all* of what it is to be a Christian, a Jew, a Moslem, a Hindu or a Buddhist of any kind or to accept a religion or to engage in religious practices or to live a religious life. In *the sense in question* one can be deeply religious without any of that. People stressing that sense take what may be a necessary condition for being religious and treat it as if it were also sufficient. But this is, as Sidney Hook once observed, conversion by stipulative redefinition. We will—to shift ground a little—not flourish as human beings if we are not reflective to some extent. But, Aristotle to the contrary notwithstanding, that is not the point in or of living. Indeed, there is no one thing that constitutes the point in or of living. There are many and diverse ways of living that can be partially constitutive of human flourishing. Some reflectiveness, though sometimes of a rather minimal sort, plays a part in all of them. But to take reflectiveness or (what is not the same thing) rationality to be the key thing in a good life is surely very *parti-pris*. It is little more than a rationalistic philosophical prejudice. No one thing captures the point in or of living, for there is no "the point in or of living," though this is not at all to say that, this being so, our lives are, let alone must be, without point. Such Dostoevskyanism is just hyperbolic rhetoric. See Kurt Baier, "The Meaning of Life," in E. D. Klemke, ed., *The Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 81-117, and Kai Nielsen, "Linguistic Philosophy and 'The Meaning of Life,'" in Klemke, ed., *The Meaning of Life*, p. 177-204.

34 Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, p. 278-79, tr. p. 209.

claimed, should not be seen simply as a system of beliefs but primarily as a system of forces. People caught up in and with a religious life will not just be persons who see the world in a certain way—though they will do that too—and who, with what they take to be their religious insight, know what others do not know; they are, as well, people who feel within themselves an extraordinary power. They feel, as Durkheim put it himself, a “force which dominates him [*sic*], but which, at the same time, sustains him and raises him above himself.”³⁵ And, Durkheim added, “for the believer, the essence of religion is not a plausible or seductive hypothesis about man or his destiny. He sticks to his faith because he cannot renounce it, so he thinks, without losing something of himself, without being cast down, without a diminution of his vitality, a lowering of his moral temperature.”³⁶ Without, Durkheim believed, an empathetic feeling for and sensitivity to religion, there is no understanding it. Without that, we would be, *vis-à-vis* religious sensibilities, like a tone-deaf piano tuner toward sounds. But, as we have observed earlier, non-believers can have, and sometimes do have, the requisite sensibilities. Most are not at all like people from Mars *vis-à-vis* Judaism, Christianity or Islam or at least one or another of these religions.

An error-theory, without departing from an utterly naturalistic basis, acknowledges the importance of the pervasive and persistent affective side of religion, while still accounting for the *Ersatz*-cognitive side, which is so necessary for its continued successful functioning, though, of course, it cannot be recognized to be *Ersatz*-cognitive by the person sustained in belief. It shows us how religion, with its claims to a mysterious “higher truth,” is so rooted in error that we can have no sound reasons for believing that religious claims even could be true. But it also shows how these are necessary illusions if the religious life is to remain intact. And it explains, as well, the strong hold that the religious life has on people. Though keeping some modern societies in mind (usually the wealthier societies with higher average levels of education), we should qualify this by saying “some people.” The disenchantment of the world and the resistance to re-enchantment in such societies (Sweden and Denmark, for example) has gone very deep.

3

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 (forgetting about its alleged claim to truth) appropriately

35 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 101.

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.³⁷ That is, our attention turns now not to questions concerning the truth or coherence of religious beliefs or to their logical status or to what sense they have, but to an attempt to understand their role in life, whether the beliefs themselves are coherent or not.

Religion answers to various human needs.

- (1) It functions to provide the bonds that unite a society; it functions to provide a society with its sense of moral unity. It functions to uphold and reaffirm at regular intervals the collective sentiments and ideas which make up its unity and distinctive nature. (Durkheim)
- (2) It functions to reinvigorate and in that way uphold the *authority* of the social group. In this way it functions to help sustain and keep stable the social order. (Durkheim)
- (3) It functions ideologically to induce the dominated class or classes to accept the harsh social order in which they are oppressed and, not infrequently, brutalized. But it also, and connectedly, affords them, living as they do in a heartless and often hopeless world, a hope (in reality an illusory hope) for recompense for their sufferings and deprivations in what will be a life of bliss in heaven, after their bodily death, if only now they will trust in God and patiently accept their station and its duties, harsh though such a life may be. In that way religion is the opiate of the people. Religion is in this, and similar ways, an instrument of social control in the interests of the exploiting classes and source of illusory hope for the exploited classes. (Marx)
- (4) It functions to enable people to cope with life: to face death, estrangement, the defeat of hopes, moral failure, loss of loved ones, prolonged illness and the like. In short, it has a coping function vis-à-vis the various ailments to which we are heir. (Malinowski)
- (5) Given the fact that human beings are intensely afraid of death, religion functions to instil the belief, illusory though it be, that we can escape utter annihilation. With their funerary ritual functions, religions help people face the final crisis of life. The need is very great to

³⁷ Some have thought that morality is the real truth of religion and that this we can have without the encrusted beliefs with which the centuries have surrounded religion. This, of course, is naturalist-friendly, but would hardly suffice from a religious point of view, for the very distinctive moralities that are *religious* moralities cannot set aside, without a radical change in their very moral import, all, or even most, of those encrusted beliefs. See Terence Penelhum, "Ethics with God and Ethics Without," in Rodger Beehler, David Copp and Béla Szabados, eds., *On the Track of Reason: Essays in Honour of Kai Nielsen* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), p. 107-18, and the last two chapters of my *Naturalism without Foundations*.

provide us with assurances that we will preserve our personal identities after death. Religion provides us with such assurances and thereby has an essential function for human beings. (Malinowski)

- (6) Given our long infantile dependency and helplessness, and with the resultant father-longing that human beings have, religion functions to provide us with a sense of security, to "exorcise the terrors of nature . . . to reconcile one to the cruelty of fate, particularly as shown in death . . . [and to] make amends for the sufferings and privations that the communal life has imposed on us."³⁸ (Freud)
- (7) Religion functions even among adults as an unconscious wish-fulfilment to provide people (the great mass of people), so driven by their unconscious, with an imaginary substitute for a protecting and caring father. "God," as we have seen Freud putting it, "is the exalted father, and the longing for the father" with the sense of security this illusory belief can afford. Such is, Freud has it, "the root of the need for religion."³⁹ "Religion is intimately linked with the father complex and our helplessness gives the characteristic features to the adult's reaction to his own sense of helplessness, i.e., the formation of religion."⁴⁰ (Freud)
- (8) Religion functions, in virtue of its being a system of ideas and practices, to provide human beings with a way of comprehending what goes on in their world and some sense of control of some of the events in their lives. (Horton)

The Durkheimian and Marxian functions (1) to (4) stress the social role of religion as do (7) and (8) (though less clearly). The other functions of religion noted have more to do with how religion impacts on individuals. However, as we have previously remarked, the line of demarcation is not sharp. After all, all individuals are necessarily social individuals living in different societies with different social systems. These functions point to different things religion, intentionally or unintentionally, does in society.

It is a mistake to say of any one of these functions that it is the *really genuine function* or the *true function* of religion and the others are not really functions at all or are, comparatively, minor functions.⁴¹ It is even a mistake to rank them in terms of their alleged basicity. Even when we restrict ourselves to theisms (monotheisms or otherwise), religions have been rather different things at different times and even, as Max Weber shows, different for different strata in the same society at the same time. Sometimes one of these features is more prominent than the others and

38 Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, p. 27.

39 Ibid., p. 36.

40 Ibid., p. 38.

41 Sören Halldén, *True Love, True Humour and True Religion: A Semantic Study* (Lund, Sweden: W. K. Gleerup, 1960).

at other times others are. In modern societies where science has had a very deep impact (8) has not much of a role or perhaps even (in some societies among some strata) no role. That (8) has not much of a place is particularly so for the relatively educated strata of such societies and for the religious denominations with which they tend to have, if they have any religious affiliation at all, an affiliation. The function specified in (8) is in such societies now more and more taken over by science. But, as Robin Horton convincingly shows, (8) is prominent in many African religions and in earlier forms of Christianity and, in the less sophisticated forms of Christianity, it still continues to have that function.⁴² Similarly in complex pluralistic modern societies, Durkheim's social-bonding, moral-unity role arguably drops out or is very much attenuated. Religion, if anything, becomes in such societies socially divisive. Similarly, the Freudian conception, taken just as we have it, works better for males than for females and arguably better in patrilineal societies than in matrilineal ones. Still, all of these diverse functions are functions, of greater or lesser prominence, for religion at various times and at various places and for various peoples. There is no *essence* of religion, *essence* of theism or even *essence* of Judaism, Christianity or Islam, requiring some function to be the one true function of religion, theisms or (becoming still more specific) Christianity and the like.⁴³

Do any of these eight functions of religion at work in a society preclude the working of any of the others? I do not believe so. Some, of course, make stresses that others do not and some ignore things that others press. Durkheim, in seeing religion only in its function in establishing and reaffirming group solidarity, never seems to consider the Marxian claim that "religious beliefs have ideological functions legitimating the domination of one group or class over another."⁴⁴ But a Marxian could, and should, claim that very often, when class conflict is not overt or very prominent, religion does provide most people in the society with a sense (no doubt an illusory sense) of moral unity shielding people from a strong sense within the society in question of "them and us" and providing a sense of social cohesion and, in this convenient ideological way, helping to sustain the extant class-structured social order. And indeed this is exactly what the Marxian claims give to understand. Only the sense of moral unity for the Marxian is ideological—class societies are in reality conflictual—but this sense of moral unity is still an important and necessary illusion that helps to sustain the smooth, or relatively smooth, functioning of a class society, something that sometimes obtains when there is no sharp incompatibility

42 Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West*, p. 147-258.

43 Halldén, *True Love, True Humour and True Religion*.

44 Brian Morris, *Anthropological Studies of Religion: An Introductory Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 122.

between the forces and relations of production. And religion yielding this illusory sense of moral unity is indeed very useful for the dominant classes in sustaining their hegemony. Moreover, this illusory sense of moral unity generated by ideology will normally not be seen as ideological by the people affected by it. Indeed, for the ideology properly to work that usually must be so. Ideology, that is, often serves to disguise the class nature of society. Religion, as does ideology generally, often functions in a society to give people a sense, albeit an illusory sense, of social cohesion, a heightened sense of having collective sentiments and ideas which unite them, affording them a sense of having close social bonds in spite of different and (in reality) conflicting conditions of life along with the different interests that go with them. So religion could have exactly the functions that Durkheim specifies, and in addition have a mystificatory ideological function leading people into believing and acting as if their society is homogeneous and unified when actually it is not. This is an excellent device for social control in class society.

4

Where we come to accept such a naturalistic functional picture of religion, the question then arises whether religion is something which will always be with us. In a modern, deeply secularized world where the disenchantment of the world is pervasively felt, will people continue, as this solidifies, to have religious commitments? The question also forces itself on us, as it was forced on Freud and Durkheim, whether it is *desirable* to hope that religion will gradually wither away and that its functions will incrementally, though slowly, be taken over by utterly secular substitutes?

As a matter of present anthropological fact, all cultures have religions (though not all of them are theisms), but what is not clear is (a) what the future will be like and (b) what, if we are to have any choice in the matter, it should be like. Engels and Marx thought that with the changes in the forces of production that were coming into being, classless societies would come into existence and that in such societies religion would gradually wither away. Freud thought, though certainly with a considerable amount of scepticism, that religion might, just might, wither away; he thought, as well, that if it did it would be a good thing. But he also thought that this conviction of his was complex and challengeable. The contrast between Freud's nuanced, though still utterly atheistical, reflections and Lenin's dogmatism concerning the desirability of the end of religion is instructive here. Freud's sense of how complex things are comes out powerfully in his discussion of the matter in the final sections of his *The Future of an Illusion*. About such matters Durkheim was even more intellectually ambivalent than Freud, but, as functionally compelling for most people as he took religion to be, he also thought that as a scientific culture became ever more pervasive, a sociologi-

cal understanding and orientation toward the world might come to take over the functions now played by religion. And, as he saw it, the very having of such a sociological understanding and orientation toward the world is tantamount to having a *secular* understanding and orientation toward the world. Some later secular thinkers have come to believe that Freud and Durkheim were still too caught up in 19th-century beliefs about progress and about how human beings can come to master their world.⁴⁵ Both Freud and Durkheim, it is now not infrequently believed, were, in this respect, far too optimistic. Others think, frequently incurring the charge of being too optimistic themselves, that the question about the social viability of an utterly secular outlook and orientation to life in time coming to replace a religious one cannot, and should not, so easily be turned aside, as it usually is, as empirically infeasible whatever its intellectual rationale.⁴⁶

I have set out a range of naturalistic explanations of religion. It is frequently argued, or sometimes just rather uncritically assumed, as I noted initially, 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 belief 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.⁴⁷ No matter how we cut it, religious beliefs, on such an account, are in error and religious beliefs could have no sound claim to being true. His very explanation (as 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. If this is so, and on the not implausible assumption that people have some minimal concern for consistency, naturalist explanations of religion would, if widely accepted, destroy religion itself, the very phenomena it purports to explain. A philosopher (Gustave Belot) asked Durkheim, putting forth what Belot took to be a *reductio*, "who 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 continued, 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?" Explanation, given Durkheim's way of going about things, involves critique—a thoroughly secular critique—here and that very fact, the claim goes, reveals its explanatory inadequacy.

45 Daniel Bell, "The Return of the Sacred: The Argument about the Future of Religion," in G. A. Almond, M. Chodorow and R. H. Pearce, eds., *Progress and Its Discontents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 501-23.

46 Nielsen, *Naturalism without Foundations*, Part 4.

47 See notes 1, 27 and 33.

The naturalist should respond—and here is one of the places where what I have called an error-theory should come into play—that it is false to say that on such a conception there is nothing real underlying religious symbols. There is something 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. Here the naturalist turns the believer's familiar argument around. 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 Hepburn. Having a feel for religion does not require having the related belief, but it does require having 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. And to have that sense, as error-theorists stress, is to see, among other things, how religious beliefs are inescapably objectifying (reifying) beliefs committed to an incoherent conception of objectivity.

Naturalistic explanations are, of course, incompatible with religious belief. But they are not thereby inadequate explanations. They do not explain religion away in explaining that religious claims could not be true, for the account explains religion's origins, explains its claim to truth, explains how this very claim is something the believer cannot abandon, explains how, that notwithstanding, that very claim to truth 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. The naturalistic explanations of the type we have discussed explain, as well, religion's various cultural and historical forms, how and why they change and develop as they do, and their continuing persistence and appeal in one or another form.⁴⁸ An account which does these things well is a good candidate for a sound conception of religion, yielding an adequate range of explanations of the phenomena of religion. The naturalistic explanations we have discussed, particularly when taken together, do just that.

Appendix

This strange objectifying (reifying) belief about religion (the belief that there is a mysterious supernatural reality that is Ultimate Reality), this meta-belief, this meta-physical meta-belief, is also, or at least appears to be, a first-order religious belief. This is so because it says that there is a mysterious supernatural power, utterly spiritual in nature, all powerful, all knowing, all good, who created and sustains the

48 Wartofsky, "*Homo Homini Deus Est*," p. 154-73. See again notes 1, 27 and 33.

universe. A sentence expressing this belief at least appears to be a first-order sentence used to try to assert something very baffling indeed. Perhaps we have here what the logical positivists called "word-magic." Perhaps what is expressed by the sentence is what Rudolf Carnap called a pseudo-proposition misleadingly put, as pseudo-propositions characteristically are, in the material mode. But such a way of putting things may make for more difficulties than it solves. What can be less controversially said is that we have something here which appears at least to be first-order, but it also involves a meta-belief about there being a strange metaphysical reality—a supernatural something we know not what—somehow, in ways we do not understand, distinct from the natural order, just as on the error-theory of morality "pleasure is the sole intrinsic good" involves the meta-belief that "intrinsic good" refers to or connotes a non-natural property, intrinsic goodness, a property which is somehow also mysteriously distinct from the natural order.

Both orthodox "believers in morals" and religious believers have, error-theorists claim, an incoherent, or at least a thoroughly mistaken, conception of objectivity, a conception that, such believers believe, must somehow just go with the sincere avowal of their moral and religious beliefs. (This is not to deny what is frequently the case, namely, that one might be such a "believer in morals"—even an orthodox one, as G. E. Moore and C. D. Broad were—without being a religious believer.) But for both sets of orthodox believers, their moral and religious utterances, where made seriously, are avowals, though both sets of believers think, concerning their own respective avowals, that they are, as well, somehow mysteriously something more than avowals. In both cases, error-theorists claim, the meta-beliefs, crucial in the eyes of both sets of believers, are incoherent or at least incontrovertibly false. (I think that they should have insisted on incoherence here, but Mackie opts, for reasons which seem to me inexplicable, for saying they are false beliefs: beliefs rooted in massive error. See note 29.)

There is, however, a crucial difference between moral and religious utterances as there is a parallel crucial difference in the beliefs that go with them. The moral beliefs the moral utterances express can be demythologized away from such an assumption of objectivism—from such an objectivistic (reifying) meta-ethics at least implicitly assumed—so that these moral beliefs can, freed of incoherence, continue to have a role in our lives even with the demise of such orthodox "believing in morals" (a believing that has been a common-enough philosophical disease from Plato to Moore). There is, however, nothing like such a demythologizing for "believing in God." (To demythologize the Gospels is one thing, to demythologize the very concept of God, emptying the world of a belief in the supernatural, is another. Rudolf Bultmann attempted the former, but never the latter.) Belief in God just is inescapably broadly Platonic in background assumption. Remember, as well, that objectivism is one thing and objectivity is another. Objectivity in moral domains, and perhaps in all domains, comes to the intersubjectivity of wide and general reflective equilibrium. Objectivism is an incoherent reification of that. (See here the second part of my preface to *Naturalism without Foundations*, as well as chapters 2 and 5 and the introduction to Part 4.)