Chapter Nine
Subversive Explanations

Charles R. Pigden

Boris's Beliefs

The scientific explanation of religious belief is commonly taken to be a subversive enterprise. To explain religion as due to natural causes is to explain it away. If Boris's belief in God is due a) to a Russian Orthodox upbringing and b) to a tendency to take the universe personally owing to an HADD or hypersensitive agency detection device, this seems to suggest not only that Boris's belief is unfounded and irrational but perhaps that it is false. But this seems odd since at first sight the causes of a belief are irrelevant to its truth and even to its status as knowledge. Can a causal explanation - especially an *evolutionary* explanation - of why we believe something cast doubt on the things we believe? I shall argue that the answer is *yes* – under certain circumstances.

1. If the explanation shows *either* that X's belief in the claims P is due to an unreliable mechanism *or* that X would have been likely to believe the claims P whatever their truth-value, then X's beliefs do not amount to knowledge. (Note that the second disjunct is stronger than the first. It is one thing to show that a belief-forming mechanism is unreliable since it tends to generate false beliefs. It is another thing to show for a particular set of propositions that they would probably have been believed whatever their truth-value.)
2. If the explanation shows that some claims P are widely believed because of an unreliable mechanism *or* that they would have been widely believed whatever their

truth-value, and if the *only* reason to believe the claims P is either that they are widely believed or that they are individually difficult to doubt, then this suggests (given Ockham's razor) that the claims P are false. Thus an explanation can only suggest that a belief (or set of beliefs) is *false* if the belief-inducing mechanisms involved are truth-insensitive and there are no *other* decent arguments for the belief or beliefs in question.

3. A psycho-evolutionary account of our propensity to form religious beliefs cannot challenge the *truth* of a specific set of beliefs unless there are *no other arguments* for the truth of these beliefs. In particular there must not be a well-authenticated history of the beliefs in question which traces them back to the right kind of causes such as an act of divine intervention. For such a history would constitute an historical argument for the truth of those claims.

4. Since almost everyone agrees that we have a truth-insensitive tendency to acquire religious beliefs, the evolutionary explanation of this tendency does not add that much to the skeptical case against religion. For it is *already* generally agreed that we have such a tendency and *also* that it is highly unreliable. For most religious believers think that most religious beliefs are false.

That's roughly where I am going with this paper, but as we shall see, there is quite a lot of devil in the details. And though I will be keeping one eye on recent developments, the problems are general ones which apply, to some extent, to earlier attempts to explain religious belief without the direct recourse to divine intervention. So I shall be seasoning my argument with ancient, medieval and early modern attempts to explain both religious beliefs and our tendency to believe. Though we know a lot more now about our

belief-forming mechanisms than they did then, this does not mean that the present has nothing to learn from the past. For it has been obvious since way back when that the mechanisms that generate religious belief often produce false positives. There would be no need for missionaries, jihads or crusades if we did not have a tendency to believe in false gods. Hence those who suppose that there is a need for such things must believe that, when it comes to religion, our belief-forming mechanisms are prone to error.

Natural Histories and Genealogies

Let me start with a distinction. Modern scientific explanations of religion, like their early modern counterparts, are what might be called *natural histories*. Very roughly (and I shall have a lot more to say about this), a natural history of a set of beliefs is an explanation that traces those beliefs back to *natural* causes. I contrast natural histories with *genealogies*, a concept adapted from Nietzsche. A genealogy is an explanation of a set of beliefs which is somehow subversive of the things believed. Nietzsche's notorious *The Genealogy of Morals* is certainly designed to discredit the mawkish moral beliefs of contemporary Europe whose explanation he sought in the *ressentiment* of slaves and the self-deceptions of Christianity. Natural histories, are not necessarily genealogies; that is, they are not necessarily subversive of the beliefs that they purport to explain. And genealogies are not necessarily natural histories; that is, there are subversive explanations of beliefs or belief systems which trace the relevant beliefs back to s*uper*natural causes. This raises two questions:

1. When is a natural history a genealogy?,

and

2. Are evolutionary explanations of our propensity to religious belief genealogies in some sense or other?

But first a bit more about natural histories. For my rough characterization isn't really adequate. I suggested above that a natural history of a set of beliefs or practices is an explanation that traces those beliefs back to *natural* causes. But there are two problems with this. The first is that the notion of a natural cause is not all that clear. And the second is that every explanation has to come to an end somewhere and that an explanation could trace back a belief to a set of natural causes which were themselves the effects of divine action of some kind or other. Such an explanation would come out as a natural history according to my first formulation even though it owes it naturalistic character to the fact that it comes to an arbitrary stop at a point just subsequent to divine intervention. It seems to me that we need a definition of "natural history" that excludes those histories that owe their naturalness to their shortsightedness. Otherwise providing naturalistic explanations of religious phenomena would be a tad too easy.

Fortunately a solution to the first problem (the unclarity of the concept of a natural cause) can help us to solve the second (that our concept of a natural history allows for explanations that are only "natural" in a trivial or uninteresting sense).

A natural cause is a cause that originates in Nature. Nature is a system of composed animals, vegetables and minerals that operate according to their own natures or to "laws of nature" that are constitutive of the natural system. We do not preclude the possibility that the existence of the natural system is due to Divine decrees or even that it is sustained in being by the continuous operation of the Divine Will. But given those decrees or given God's ongoing resolution to keep the whole show on the road, nothing *further* is required by way of Divine intervention to explain most of the goings on in the system of Nature. Even if God keeps it in being, the natural world enjoys a certain explanatory

autonomy. The science of such a system would be largely independent of theology except perhaps with regard to the occasional miracle and the question of why a universe *like this* exists in first place. Note that there is nothing atheistic or even Deistic about such a conception of Nature. But it does justify a certain "methodological atheism" or at least agnosticism when investigating how the world works. If we believe in such a system we are honor bound not to employ God as an explanatory "maid of all work" to account for why this, that or the other thing happens but only (if at all) to explain

(a) the basic features of the system, and

(b) miraculous interventions that are very much the exception rather than the rule.

When it comes to individual events we don't say "God did it" unless we absolutely have to.

We can now say that a natural cause is a cause which is only the effect of supernatural or divine agencies if (or in so far as) *the whole system of Nature* is due to Divine agency. And a natural history is an explanation that traces a belief back to natural causes. Thus a natural history of a belief or set of beliefs is an explanation which excludes the possibility of supernatural intervention in support of those beliefs without excluding the possibility that God is responsible for the whole shebang.

Histories: Natural and Supernatural

These definitions and distinctions enable us to make sense of both natural and supernatural histories of religion. One and the same thinker can consistently explain one set of beliefs in terms of natural causes and another in terms of supernatural causes. Witness the case of Thomas Aquinas.

Aquinas thought that the central tenets of theism could be demonstrated by unaided reason but that Christianity required the support of revelation. But why should we believe this purported revelation? Largely because it was widely believed. "This wonderful conversion of the world to the Christian faith is the clearest witness of the signs given in the past." Christianity is an unattractive religion which runs counter to men's carnal appetites. Furthermore, it was persecuted from the first. Yet "in the midst of the tyranny of the persecutors an innumerable throng of people, both simple and most learned flocked to the Christian faith." It could not have won so many converts without divine intervention. And God would not intervene in support of a false revelation. Thus the fact that it is widely believed is the chief reason for supposing it to be true. "In this faith there are truths preached that surpass every human intellect; the pleasures of the flesh are curbed; it is taught that the things of this world should be spurned. Now, for the minds of mortal men to assent to these things is the greatest of miracles, just as it is a manifest work of divine inspiration, that spurning visible things, men should seek only what is invisible" (Aquinas 1975: 72). This is a supernatural history which is also an *anti*-genealogy, designed to *vindicate* the beliefs that it purports to explain. But supernatural histories can also be subversive. They can *undermine* the beliefs they purport to explain so long as the supernatural causes that they posit do not correspond to the content of the beliefs. There are some natural histories that are not genealogies and some genealogies that are not natural histories. Witness the case of the primitive Christians and their subversive genealogy of paganism, the rival religion that predominated in the ancient world.

> The established religions of Paganism were seen by the primitive Christians in [an] odious and formidable light. It was the universal sentiment both of the church and of heretics that the dæmons were the authors, the patrons, and the objects of idolatry. Those rebellious spirits who had been degraded from the rank of angels, and cast down into the infernal pit, were still permitted to

> roam upon earth, to torment the bodies, and to seduce the minds, of sinful men. The dæmons soon discovered and abused the natural propensity of the human heart towards devotion, and, artfully withdrawing the adoration of mankind from their Creator, they usurped the place and honours of the Supreme Deity. By the success of their malicious contrivances, they at once gratified their own vanity and revenge, and obtained the only comfort of which they were yet susceptible, the hope of involving the human species in the participation of their guilt and misery. It was confessed, or at least it was imagined, that they had distributed among themselves the most important characters of polytheism ... They lurked in the temples, instituted festivals and sacrifices, invented fables, pronounced oracles, and were frequently allowed to perform miracles. ... But the belief of the Christian was accompanied with horror. The most trifling mark of respect to the national worship he considered as a direct homage yielded to the dæmon, and as an act of rebellion against the majesty of God. (Gibbon 1994: 459–60)

Thus the beliefs of the pagans were due to supernatural causes. But the objects of their worship were not genuine gods but daemons who used their supernatural powers to fool the populace and usurp the honors that were properly due only to the one true God. The beliefs of the pagans were explicable but false.

However, a belief in supernatural beings does not preclude a naturalistic explanation of *some* religious beliefs. Here, again I can cite Aquinas. He wanted to argue that Christianity was believable because it was widely believed. But in his own day Islam was a lot more widely believed than Christianity which was just hanging on in Europe. Africa, the Middle East and the greater part of Spain had fallen to Mohammed and as yet there was no prospect of a New World to conquer. Why didn't the fact that Islam was widely believed count in its favor?

Aquinas' reply was a genealogy which was also a natural history. He sought to show how Islam might be widely believed without being true. But being a bit more of a rationalist than the

primitive Christians, he did not want to put it down to the personal agency of Satan. Hence natural causes had to do.

> On the other hand those who founded sects committed to erroneous doctrines proceeded in a way that is the opposite to this. The point is clear in the case of Mohammed. He seduced the people with the promises of carnal pleasure to which the concupiscence of the flesh goads us … [and] ... gave free rein to carnal pleasure. … No wise men, men trained in things divine and human, believed in him from the beginning. Those who believed in him were brutal men, desert wanderers, utterly ignorant of all divine teachings through whose numbers Mohammed forced others to become his followers by the violence of his arms." (Aquinas 1975: 73)

In other words a religion which promises plenty of opportunity for sex is bound to find favor with brutal desert wanderers, and after that military victory does the rest. Thus natural causes suffice to explain the success of Islam whereas Divine intervention is required to explain the success of Christianity.

Aquinas prudently fails to mention that in Islam too the pleasures of the flesh are curbed. It is true that if you can afford it you can have more than one wife, and therefore, presumably plenty of sex. But you must give up grog and fast during Ramadan. Carnal men who think that a woman is only a woman but a drink is the real thing might disagree with St Thomas over which religion is the most demanding. Aquinas also fails to mention (perhaps because he didn't know) that there are *many* ascetic religions which require us to curb the pleasures of the flesh and spurn the things of this world - though in the name of different sets of otherworldly goods (e.g. Buddhism, Jainism etc.). Obviously ascetic religions whether true or false, exert a psychological pull. But for a long time - until the age of Voltaire and Gibbon in fact - the success of Christianity was taken to be a good reason for believing it, and the success of other religions was either explained away or swept under the carpet.

It can't be said that Gibbon tackles the matter head-on - that wasn't his way. But he does try to do for Christianity what Aquinas did in a rather ineffectual way for Islam: he explains its success as due to natural rather than supernatural causes. That is, he explains how it could have come to be widely believed without being true.

> Our curiosity is naturally prompted to enquire by what means the Christian faith obtained so remarkable a victory over the established religions of the earth. To this inquiry an obvious but satisfactory answer may be returned; that it was owing to the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself and to the ruling providence of its great Author. But ... as the wisdom of providence frequently condescends to use the passions of the human heart and the general circumstances of mankind as instruments to execute its purpose, we may still be permitted, though with a becoming submission, to ask, not indeed what were the first, but what were the secondary cause of the rapid growth of the Christian Church? [These were]: – I. The inflexible, and if we may use the expression, the intolerant zeal of the Christians ... II. The doctrine of a future life, improved by every additional circumstance which could give weight and efficacy to this important truth. III. The miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church. IV. The pure and austere morals of the Christians. V. The union and discipline of the Christian republic. (Gibbon 1994: 447).

Note that it is the *doctrine* not the *fact* of a future life that attracted the proselytes and it is the miracles *ascribed* to the primitive church, rather than the miracles themselves that brought in the converts. It is clearly Gibbon's opinion that there is no good reason to believe in a future life and that most, if not all, of these miracles were frauds or fables. Of course, the conclusion that Gibbon invites us to draw, is that if the "secondary causes," "the passions of the human heart and the general circumstances of mankind" suffice to explain the success of Christianity, we can dispense with the "truth and evidence of the doctrine itself,"

together with "the ruling providence of its great Author." His genealogy of belief deprives Christianity of its principle support.

Most of Gibbon's clerical opponents – "the watchmen of the Holy citadel" as he loftily describes them in his *Memoirs* – could see that primitive Christianity was being pretty liberally sneered at, but did not really see the point of Gibbon's polemical strategy. Stung by his sneers and affronted by his irony, they flailed about answering specific charges but did not really get to grips with his genealogical argument. One of the few to keep his head (together with some sense of politeness and decorum) was Richard Watson, subsequently Bishop of Llandaff.

> To the inquiry, by what means the Christian faith obtained so remarkable a victory over the established religions of the earth, you rightly answer, By the evidence of the doctrine itself and the ruling providence of its Author. But afterwards, in assigning for this astonishing event five secondary causes, derived from the passions of the human heart and the general circumstances of mankind, you seem to some to have insinuated, that Christianity, like other Impostures, might have made its way in the world, though its origin had been as human as the means by which you suppose it was spread. (Watson 1997: 45)

In answer, Watson endeavors to show, that "the causes you produce are either inadequate to the attainment of the end proposed; or that their efficiency, great as you imagine it, was derived from other principles [i.e. supernatural ones] than those you have thought proper to mention." In other words, to restore the Thomistic argument for the truth of the Christian revelation, Watson has to prove that Gibbon's explanation is inadequate. When it come to the rise of Christianity, his argument is that if God didn't do it, it would not have gotten done.

Explanations: Deep, Shallow and Subversive

All the explanations we have considered so far are *shallow* in a certain sense. They presuppose but do not explain the fact that people are prone to religious beliefs. This is particularly clear in the Christian explanation for the prevalence of Paganism. "The dæmons soon discovered and abused *the natural propensity of the human heart* towards devotion." But at least in Gibbon's exposition, the Primitive Christians did not bother to explain this propensity. It's an obvious fact that we *do* have a propensity to devotion, and given their polemical purposes there was no particular need to dig any deeper. The same goes for Aquinas' explanation for the success of Islam. All human beings, including brutal desert wanderers, are in the market for some religion or other, and since they are in the market for religion, a religion that promises the opportunity for plenty of sex is bound to be a winner, especially if its supporters can get into government and tax people into submission. Although Aquinas regards the rise of Christianity as miraculous, this is not *because it is a religion* (since believing in some religion is natural enough) but *because it is a religion that prohibits the pleasures of the flesh*. Gibbon's historical explanation of the rise of Christianity likewise presupposes a natural propensity to devotion which he does not feel the need to explain. But he probably felt that he could afford to be shallow here since he was the devoted disciple of someone he believed to be deep. For Gibbon was an avid fan of David Hume (Hume's dying letter of praise for the first volume of *Decline and Fall* had "overpaid the labour of ten years" [Gibbon 1984: 160]) and in the *Natural History of Religion* Hume tries to trace back our propensity to believe to a set of psychological causes.

1. Fear, hope and incomprehension. "We are placed in this-world, as in a great theatre, where the true springs and causes of every event are entirely concealed from us … We hang in perpetual suspence between life and death, health

and sickness, plenty and want; which are distributed amongst the human species by secret and unknown causes, whose operation is oft unexpected, and always unaccountable. These *unknown causes,* then, become the constant object of our hope and fear" (Hume 1993: 140). (Things have gotten better for some of us since Hume's day but this is surely an accurate account of what life has been like for most people throughout most of human history.)

2. We have a strong disposition to read mentality into what is not really mental. Thus we tend to treat these unknown causes as agents to be appeased. There is a "universal propensity to believe in invisible, intelligent power[s – that is, gods – which] if not an original instinct, [is] at least a general attendant of human nature" (Hume 1993: 184), depending, as it does, upon "an universal tendency amongst mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object those qualities … of which they are intimately conscious (Hume 1993: 141).

3. Finally we have an intellectual taste for the weird and wonderful. There is a tendency on the part of "the mind" "when any thing is affirmed utterly absurd and miraculous," to "admit of such a fact, upon account of that very circumstance, which ought to destroy all its authority" because of the agreeable" passion of *surprize* and *wonder'* that such reports excite (Hume 1975: 117).

Thus we have a propensity to believe in gods which is founded partly on fear and a desire to control the mysterious forces to which we are subject, partly on a tendency to take the universe personally, and partly on a perverse taste for the weird and

wonderful. Hume is adamant that religious beliefs are not typically the products of a rational process, though in the *Natural History* he pretends that rational arguments for God's existence are in fact available. But as the *Dialogues* make plain, this was not his real opinion. However, Hume does attempt to *explain* the propensity to devotion that others merely presuppose which means that his theory is deeper than theirs. (Note though that theory can be shallow but true and deep but false. Depth is a mark of explanatory ambition not a proof of explanatory success.) Moreover Hume's history would appear to be a sort of generalized genealogy of religion. For the psychological mechanisms that explain religion are highly unreliable, resulting in different and inconsistent beliefs. There may be a "universal propensity to believe in invisible, intelligent powers" but there is no *one* set of powers that we have a universal propensity to believe in. The gods are the products of fear and fancy, but since our fears and especially our fancies are different, we postulate different and inconsistent deities. Since at most *one* such theology can be correct, our propensity to devotion is not something to be relied on. Even if we happen by chance to hit on the one true religion, we know that *most* of the gods that it causes us to postulate are false, a point that is admitted even by believers, since those who believe in one God (or set of gods) denounce the "delusive glosses" of everybody else.[1] What Hume provides is a natural history of *most* but not necessarily *all* religious beliefs since he traces them back to natural causes including a natural propensity to devotion, which he proceeds to anatomize and explain. But he cannot preclude the possibility that *some* religious beliefs are genuinely due to divine intervention (though in his famous section "Of Miracles" [1975: 109–131] he endeavors to argue, with indifferent success, that although God may intervene in the course of nature it is never reasonable to believe that he does). Thus his natural history is a genealogy in one sense but not in another. It argues that religious beliefs *generally* are due to an unreliable

. Here I draw on Pigden 2010.

mechanism, and it explains how the many false religions could have come to be believed even though they are false. But as Hume cannot preclude the possibility that *some* religious beliefs are genuinely due to divine intervention, he cannot show that *every* believer would have come to his or her religious opinions whatever their truth-value. At best, his argument suggests that *given the natural order* the world's religions would *probably* have been believed whether true or false

However a natural history of a set of beliefs need not be a genealogy. Witness Hume's natural history of our moral opinions, which in his view are due to an innate moral sense - a tendency to approve of some things and disapprove of others - plus a process of cultural evolution which leads us to practice and approve of a range of "artificial" virtues. (See Hume's *Treatise,* Book 3.) Hume thinks that the Moral Sense is a reliable belief-generating mechanism because the moral facts are defined in terms of its outputs. To say that an act is right is to say that, because of our shared Moral Sense, we have a tendency to approve of it under certain conditions. (These include *not* being subject to the "delusive glosses of superstition and false religion" [Hume 1975: 270].) Hence if our Moral Sense causes us to approve of an action under the relevant conditions, it follows automatically that it is right. Indeed Hume makes the claim, rather startling for an alleged emotivist, that the moral "opinions of men" are "in a great measure, infallible"! (Hume 1978: 546.) Here Hume differs sharply from Michael Ruse (1991) who agrees that we share a moral sense – indeed an *evolved* moral sense – but takes this as an argument for moral scepticism since in his view the moral facts are *not* to be defined in terms of its outputs. Thus *Ruse*'s natural history of morals, is also a genealogy, since it suggests that we would have acquired the moral beliefs that we possess whatever their truth-value: Hume's natural history of morals is not, since moral truth is tied to the beliefs that we are naturally inclined to acquire.

When is a natural history a genealogy? A natural history of a set of beliefs P is an explanation which traces those beliefs back to natural causes (that is to causes that don't presuppose divine intervention or supernatural agencies). A natural history is a *genealogy* if it traces those beliefs P back to unreliable mechanisms or suggests that, given the natural causes, the claims P would probably have been believed whatever their truth-value. Hume's *Natural History of Religion* is a natural history of religion because it traces our religious beliefs back to natural causes. And it is a genealogy because it purports to explain why most religions *have* been believed *even though* they are false and hence why they *would have* been believed *even if* there were false. But although Hume stresses the unreliable nature of our propensity towards devotion this was actually a thesis on which everyone would have had to agree. For given the diversity of contradictory religions, it follows that most religions are false.

Explanations: Deep and Deeper

Of course, Hume's explanation of our propensity to devotion is rather crude since his theory of the mind was a bit simple-minded. There is a lot more to our mental functioning than the association of ideas, which is the mechanism that he chiefly relies on when explaining human psychology. Nonetheless Hume's theory looks like a first approximation to the kinds of theories defended by the likes of Boyer (2001) or Barrett (2004). Hume's "inclination to find our own Figures in the Clouds our Face in the Moon [and] our Passions and Sentiments even in inanimate Matter" looks remarkably like the hypersensitive agency detection device or HADD of which they make so much. His claim that we are sometimes tempted to believe in the "absurd and miraculous" by a passion for "*surprize* and *wonder*" anticipates their far more sophisticated discussions of the kinds of belief that

are intellectually salient given the current configuration of the human mind. But the real difference between Hume and his successors is not that he is less sophisticated but that they are much deeper. For Hume our psychological dispositions constitute explanatory bedrock. Once we have mapped the workings of the human mind, that's as low as we can go. There's no further explanation (at least none he could believe in) of why we are the way we are. Not so for the evolutionary psychologists. Since the human mind is an evolved, thing there are questions to be asked (and maybe even answered) about why it has evolved to be the way that it is. Indeed, if we are very lucky, we may be able to go one better. A good theory of how the mind got to be may help us to understand the way that it is. The evolutionary past may help to illuminate the psychological present.

Genealogy, Knowledge and Subversion

But this does not answer the questions that we started out with. Are evolutionary explanations religion genealogies and, if so, in what sense? Can they subvert religious beliefs either by demonstrating that they do not rise to the dignity of knowledge or suggesting that they are false?

To begin with, evolutionary explanations of religion are generalized natural histories like Hume's. They explain *most* but not necessarily *all* religious beliefs since they trace them back to natural causes, specifically a natural propensity to devotion, for which they provide an evolutionary explanation. But they cannot preclude the possibility that *some* religious beliefs are genuinely due to divine intervention. This means that they are generalized genealogies in much the same sense as they are generalized natural histories. They suggest that religious beliefs generally are due to an unreliable mechanism. And they explain how the many non-existent gods can have come to be believed in despite their

non-existence. But since they cannot preclude the possibility that *some* religious beliefs are *genuinely* due to divine intervention, they cannot show that *every* believer would have come to his or her beliefs whatever their truth-value. They can only show that *given the natural order* (which includes the human mind and the dispositions that it has gradually evolved), the world's religions would *probably* have been believed even if false. Evolutionary theories of our tendency to religion can also provide the chief ingredient in individualized genealogies of *specific* beliefs. But a full-blown natural history of a religious belief P would have to include not only our natural propensity to devotion, but also an account of the specific natural causes that promoted the belief that P in the minds of believers. Mary Magdalene might have had an evolved propensity to religion, but if she really saw Christ in the garden, her belief that Christ is risen would have been partly due to a supernatural event. Hence a *full* explanation of her religious beliefs would be neither a natural history nor a genealogy. On the other hand, if we *do* have an evolved propensity to devotion which often results in "false positives," (that is, in a belief in false gods) that sets the bar a fair bit lower, when it comes to constructing such individualized explanations. If the primitive Christians were likely to have believed in the resurrection whether or not Christ rose from the dead (since people often come to believe tall tales about charismatic religious teachers), I don't have to show *exactly* how that belief arose to call it into question. If we are known to be credulous when it comes to religion then it is reasonable to regard the contents of religious creeds with a substantial dose of suspicion.

What about knowledge? Someone knows that P if and only if P is true, they believe that P and … what exactly? It can't be that P is justified since as Gettier showed a belief can be both justified and true but not an instance of knowledge. At the moment the definition of knowledge in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions is very much an open problem. Luckily I don't need to solve it for the purposes of this paper. For if some among the

suggested conditions are *necessary* (not sufficient) for knowledge, the existence of an evolved propensity to devotion can show that although there are many subjects *S* who believe religious claims P, most such subjects do not really know the claims that they profess to believe. Take reliabilism about knowledge. For the reliabilist a subject's belief that P does not qualify as an instance of knowledge unless it is due to a reliable belief-forming mechanism (see Steup 2008). More specifically:

> S only knows that P if (i) S believes that P, (ii) P is true and (iii) S's belief that P is the product of a reliable cognitive process.

But in so far as our religious beliefs are due to an evolved propensity to devotion, they do not meet this condition. For the propensity in question is known to unreliable, often generating false positives, a point that is agreed even by those who think that *some* of the positives are true. But note that on this conception of knowledge, it is not that the propensity is *evolved* that is important but that it is *unreliable*. If the propensity were *evolved* but *reliable* our religious beliefs might still rise to the dignity of knowledge (as moral beliefs do for Hume). And if it were *unreliable* but *not* evolved (for instance if it were the direct product of divine intervention by a malicious god) then we might believe religious truths but we still would not know the truths that we believed.

What about the condition suggested by Plantinga, a condition specifically rigged so that Christianity (if true) would be able to meet it?

> S knows that P if and only if (i) S believes that P, (ii) P is true and (iii) S's belief that P is produced in S by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for S's kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth.

What Plantinga wants to argue is that *if* Christian belief meets

condition (ii) it *also* meets condition (iii). So if Christianity is true, Christian belief meets the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge even if modern Christians have no decent arguments for the things they believe. But the faculties in question add up to our propensity to devotion, a propensity that is demonstrably unreliable. We are strongly inclined to believe the religions that are culturally available to us whether or not they are true, and to invent new (and usually false) religions in times of cultural ferment. Doesn't this suggest that our religious beliefs are *not* produced by "cognitive faculties functioning according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth"? Not so, replies Plantinga, because the cognitive faculties only have to be *successfully* aimed at truth if they are functioning in the right kind of "cognitive environment." And we are only in the right environment if the correct religion is culturally available. But here he faces a problem. According to the Biblical narrative, which he takes to be substantially true, the ancient Hebrews were functioning in a cognitive environment that was pretty close to optimum. Not only was the true religion culturally available to them – God himself often attested to its truth by divine intervention. Yet the propensity to devotion was *still* unreliable since the Lord could hardly turn his back for a moment before the people went a-whoring after strange gods. (Note, *strange* gods not *no* gods – it was still a propensity to devotion rather than atheism that was doing the idolatrous business!)

> When the law was given in thunder from Mount Sinai; when the tides of the ocean and the course of the planets were suspended for the convenience of the Israelites; and when temporal rewards and punishments were the immediate consequences of their piety or disobedience; they perpetually relapsed into rebellion against the visible majesty of their Divine King, placed the idols of the nations in the sanctuary of Jehovah, and imitated every fantastic ceremony that was practiced in the tents of the Arabs or in the cities of Phœnicia. (Gibbon 1994: 449)

Ah, Plantinga would reply, the cognitive faculties that can underwrite knowledge only have to be *successfully* aimed at truth (that is reliable) if they are functioning in the right environment and if they are "functioning properly" that is "subject to no dysfunction." And the cognitive faculties of the ancient Israelites were *not* functioning properly since they were corrupted by original sin. But the problem for Plantinga is that with the possible exception of Adam and Eve we are *all* supposed to suffer from original sin. It is a natural part of our intellectual make-up, only to be relieved by Grace. So if it includes a tendency to go a-whoring after strange gods – as presumably it must – that tendency is natural to us, part of our genetic make-up and hence part of the design plan on which we are built. (Would it subsist if God chose otherwise? Obviously not!) In other words, if, as a result of original sin, our *sensus divinatus* is highly unreliable and often leads us astray, this is not because our faculties are dysfunctional but because they are defective. The point is reinforced if the faculties in question are the products of natural selection. For according to the evolutionary theorists the tendencies which go together to explain our propensity to devotion were not selected for because they tended to produce truth at the level of theology. They are essentially byproducts of dispositions that are useful for other purposes. Thus our basic religious beliefs are *not* produced by cognitive faculties operating according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth. For if the evolutionary theorists are to be believed, truth in this area is not what they are aimed at, and even if it were, to be *successfully* aimed at truth they would have to be a lot more reliable than they actually are. Thus even on Plantinga's carefully rigged conditions, religious beliefs typically do not amount to knowledge even if, by some cosmic fluke, they happen to be true.

Does the unreliability of our propensity to devotion suggest that the resulting beliefs are *false*? Not by itself, no. But as it is with WMDs so it is with the gods. If you search the desert *really*

thoroughly, absence of evidence gradually metamorphoses into evidence of absence.

References

Aquinas, St Thomas. 1975. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press.

Barrett, J. L. 2004. *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* Plymouth, AltaMira Press.

Boyer, P. 2001. *Religion Explained*, New York, Basic Books.

Gibbon, E. 1984. *Memoirs of My Life*, edited by B. Radice. Harmondsworth, Penguin.

Gibbon, E. 1994. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 3 vols. D. Womersley ed. Harmondsworth, Penguin.

Hume, D. 1975. *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge /P.H. Nidditch. 3rd ed. Oxford: Clarendon.

Hume, D. 1978. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, eds. L.A. Selby-Bigge/P.H. Nidditch. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hume, D. 1993. *Dialogues and the Natural History*, edited by J. C. A. Gaskin. Oxford: Oxford World Classics.

Nietzsche, F. 1996. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Plantinga, Alvin. 2000. *Warranted Christian Belief* New York: Oxford University Press.

Steup, Matthias. 2008. "The Analysis of Knowledge." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/knowledge-analysis

Watson, R. 1994 [1776]. "An Apology for Christianity in a Series of Letters Addressed to Edward Gibbon." In *Religious Scepticism: Contemporary Responses to Gibbon*, edited by D. Womersley. Bristol: Thoemmes.