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BREAKING  
THE SPELL

RELIGION AS A NATURAL PHENOMENON

# Belief in Belief

## 1 You better believe it

*I think God honors the fact that I want to believe in Him, whether I feel sure or not.*

—Anonymous informant quoted by Alan Wolfe, in *The Transformation of American Religion*

*The proof that the Devil exists, acts and succeeds is precisely that we no longer believe in him.* —Denis de Rougemont, *The Devil's Share*

At the end of chapter 1, I promised to return to Hume's question in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, the question of whether we have *good reasons* for believing in God, and in this chapter, I will keep that promise. The preceding chapters have laid some new foundations for this inquiry, but also uncovered some problems besetting it that need to be addressed before any effective confrontation between theism and atheism can take place.

Once our ancestors became reflective (and hyperreflective) about their own beliefs, and thus appointed themselves stewards of the beliefs they thought most important, the phenomenon of *believing in belief* became a salient social force in its own right, sometimes

eclipsing the lower-order phenomena that were its object. Consider a few cases that are potent today. Because many of us believe in democracy and recognize that the security of democracy in the future depends critically on *maintaining the belief in* democracy, we are eager to quote (and quote and quote) Winston Churchill's famous line: "Democracy is the worst form of government except all the other forms that have been tried." As stewards of democracy, we are often conflicted—eager to point to flaws that ought to be repaired, yet just as eager to reassure people that the flaws are not that bad, that democracy can police itself, so their faith in it is not misplaced.

The same point can be made about science. Since the belief in the integrity of scientific procedures is almost as important as the actual integrity, there is always a tension between a whistle-blower and the authorities, even when they know that they have mistakenly conferred scientific respectability on a fraudulently obtained result. Should they quietly reject the offending work and discreetly dismiss the perpetrator, or make a big stink?<sup>1</sup>

And certainly some of the intense public fascination with celebrity trials is to be explained by the fact that belief in the rule of law is considered a vital ingredient in our society; so, if famous people are seen to be above the law, this jeopardizes the general trust in the rule of law. Hence we are interested not just in the trial, but in the public reactions to the trial, and the reactions to those reactions, creating a spiraling inflation of media coverage. We who live in democracies have become somewhat obsessed with gauging public opinion on all manner of topics, and for good reason: in a democracy it really matters what the people believe. If the public cannot be mobilized into extended periods of outrage by reports of corruption, or the torturing of prisoners by our agents, for instance, our democratic checks and balances are in jeopardy. In his hopeful book, *Development as Freedom* (1999), and elsewhere (see especially Sen, 2003), the Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen makes the important point that you don't have to win an election to achieve

your political aims. Even in shaky democracies, what the leaders believe about the beliefs that prevail in their countries influences what they take their realistic options to be, so belief maintenance is an important political goal in its own right.

Even more important than political beliefs, in the eyes of many, are what we might call metaphysical beliefs. Nihilism—the belief in nothing—has been seen by many to be a deeply dangerous virus, for obvious reasons. When Friedrich Nietzsche hit upon his idea of the Eternal Recurrence—he thought he had proved that we relive our lives infinitely many times—his first inclination (according to some stories) was to kill himself without revealing the proof, in order to spare others from this life-destroying belief.<sup>2</sup> Belief in the *belief that something matters* is understandably strong and widespread. Belief in free will is another vigorously protected vision, for the same reasons, and those whose investigations seem to others to jeopardize it are sometimes deliberately misrepresented in order to discredit what is seen as a dangerous trend (Dennett, 2003c). The physicist Paul Davies (2004) has recently defended the view that belief in free will is so important that it may be "a fiction worth maintaining." It is interesting that he doesn't seem to think that his own discovery of the awful truth (what he takes to be the awful truth) incapacitates him morally, but believes that others, more fragile than he, will need to be protected from it.

Being the unwitting or uncaring bearer of good news or bad news is one thing; being the self-appointed champion of a meme is something quite different. Once people start committing themselves (in public, or just in their "hearts") to particular ideas, a strange dynamic process is brought into being, in which the original commitment gets buried in pearly layers of defensive reaction and meta-reaction. "Personal rules are a *recursive* mechanism; they continually take their own pulse, and if they feel it falter, that very fact will cause further faltering," the psychiatrist George Ainslie observes in his remarkable book, *Breakdown of Will* (2001, p. 88). He describes the dynamic of these processes in terms of compet-

ing strategic commitments that can contest for control in an organization—or an individual. Once you start living by a set of explicit rules, the stakes are raised: When you lapse, what should you do? Punish yourself? Forgive yourself? Pretend you didn't notice?

After a lapse, the long-range interest is in the awkward position of a country that has threatened to go to war in a particular circumstance that has then occurred. The country wants to avoid war without destroying the credibility of its threat, and may therefore look for ways to be seen as not having detected the circumstance. Your long-range interest will suffer if you catch yourself ignoring a lapse, but perhaps not if you can arrange to ignore it without catching yourself. This arrangement, too, must go undetected, which means that a successful process of ignoring must be among the many mental expedients that arise by trial and error—the ones you keep simply because they make you feel better without your realizing why. [p. 150]

This idea that there are myths we live by, myths that must not be disturbed at any cost, is always in conflict with our ideal of truth-seeking and truth-telling, sometimes with lamentable results. For example, racism is at long last widely recognized as a great social evil, so many reflective people have come to endorse the second-order belief that *belief in the equality of all people regardless of their race* is to be vigorously fostered. How vigorously? Here people of goodwill differ sharply. Some believe that belief in racial differences is so pernicious that *even when it is true* it is to be squelched. This has led to some truly unfortunate excesses. For instance, there are clear clinical data about how people of different ethnicity are differently susceptible to disease, or respond differently to various drugs, but such data are considered off limits by some researchers, and some funders of research. This has the perverse effect that strongly indicated avenues of research are deliberately avoided, much to the detriment of the health of the ethnic groups involved.<sup>3</sup>

Ainslie uncovers strategic belief-maintenance in a wide variety of cherished human practices:

Activities that are spoiled by counting them, or counting on them, have to be undertaken through indirection if they are to stay valuable. For instance, romance undertaken for sex or even "to be loved" is thought of as crass, as are some of the most lucrative professions if undertaken for money, or performance art if done for effect. Too great an awareness of the motivational contingencies for sex, affection, money, or applause spoils the effort, and not only because it undeceives the other people involved. Beliefs about the intrinsic worth of these activities are valued beyond whatever accuracy these beliefs might have, because they promote the needed indirection. [In press]

Though not at all restricted to religion, belief in belief is nowhere else a more fecund engine of elaboration. Ainslie surmises that it explains some of the otherwise baffling *epistemic* taboos found in religions:

From priesthood to fortune-telling, contact with the intuitive seems to need some kind of divination. This is all the more true for approaches that cultivate a sense of empathy with a god. Several religions forbid the attempt to make their deity more tangible by drawing pictures of him, and Orthodox Judaism forbids even naming him. The experience of God's presence is supposed to come through some kind of invitation that he may or may not accept, not through invocation. [2001, p. 192]

What do people do when they discover that they no longer believe in God? Some of them don't do anything; they don't stop going to church, and they don't even tell their loved ones. They just quietly get on with their lives, living as morally (or immorally) as they did before. Others, such as Don Cupitt, author of *After God: The Future of Religion*, feel the need to cast about for a religious creed that they can endorse with a straight face. They have a firm

belief that *belief in God* is something to preserve, so when they find the traditional concepts of God frankly incredible they don't give up. They seek a substitute. And the search, once again, need not be all that conscious and deliberate. Without ever being frankly aware that a cherished ideal is endangered in some way, people may be strongly moved by a nameless dread, the sinking sense of a loss of conviction, a threat intuited but not articulated that needs to be countered vigorously. This puts them in a state of mind that makes them particularly receptive to novel emphases that somehow seem right or fitting. Like sausage-making and the crafting of legislation in a democracy, creed revision is a process that is upsetting to watch too closely, so it is no wonder that the fog of mystery descends so gracefully over it.

Much has been written over the centuries about the historic processes by which polytheisms turned into monotheism—belief in gods being replaced by belief in God. What is less often stressed is how this belief in God joined forces with the *belief in belief in God* to motivate the migration of the concept of God in the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) away from concrete anthropomorphism to ever more abstract and depersonalized concepts. What is remarkable about this can be illuminated by contrast with other conceptual shifts that have occurred during the same period. Fundamental concepts can certainly change over time. Our concept of matter has changed quite radically from the days of the ancient Greek atomists. Our scientific conceptions of time and space today, thanks to clocks and telescopes and Einstein and others, are different from theirs as well. Some historians and philosophers have argued that these shifts are not as gradual as they may at first appear but, rather, are abrupt saltations, so drastic that the before and after concepts are "incommensurable" in some way.<sup>4</sup>

Are any of these conceptual revisions actually so revolutionary as to render communication across the ages impossible, as some have argued? The case is hard to make, since we can apparently chart the changes accurately and in detail, understanding them all as we go.

In particular, there seems no reason to believe that our *everyday* conceptions of space and time would be even *somewhat* alien to Alexander the Great, say, or Aristophanes. We would have little difficulty conversing with either of them about today, tomorrow, and last year, or the thousands of yards or paces between Athens and Baghdad. But if we tried to converse with the ancients about God, we would find a much larger chasm separating us. I can think of no other concept that has undergone so dramatic a deformation. It is as if *their* concept of milk had turned into *our* concept of health, or as if *their* concept of fire had turned into *our* concept of energy. You can't *literally* drink health or *literally* extinguish energy, and (today, according to many but not all believers) you can't *literally* listen to God or *literally* sit beside Him, but these would be strange claims indeed to the original monotheists. The Old Testament Jehovah, or Yahweh, was quite definitely a *super-man* (a He, not a She) who could take sides in battles, and be both jealous and wrathful. The original New Testament Lord is more forgiving and loving, but still a Father, not a Mother or a genderless Force, and active in the world, needless to say, through His miracle-performing Son. The genderless Person without a body who nevertheless answers prayers in real time (Stark's conscious supernatural *being*) is still far too anthropomorphic for some, who prefer to speak of a Higher Power (Stark's *essence*) whose characteristics are beyond comprehension—aside from the fact that they are, in some incomprehensible way, good, not evil.<sup>5</sup> Does the Higher Power have (creative) intelligence? In what way? Does It (*not* He or She) care about us? About anything? The fog of mystery has descended conveniently over all the anthropomorphic features that have not been abandoned outright.

And a further adaptation has been grafted on: it is impolite to ask about these matters. If you persist, you are likely to get a response along these lines: "God can see you when you're doing something evil in the dark, but He does *not* have eyelids, and never blinks, you silly rude person, and of course He can read your mind

even when you are careful not to talk to yourself, but still He prefers you to pray to Him in words, and don't ask me how or why. These are mysteries we finite mortals will never understand." People of all faiths have been taught that any such questioning is somehow insulting or demeaning to their faith, and must be an attempt to ridicule their views. What a fine protective screen this virus provides—permitting it to shed the antibodies of skepticism effortlessly!

But it doesn't always work, and when the skepticism becomes more threatening, stronger measures can be invoked. One of the most effective is also one of the most transparent: the old *diabolical lie*—the term comes from de Rougemont (1944), who speaks of "the putative proclivity of 'The Father of Lies' for appearing as his own opposite." It is, almost literally, a trick with mirrors, and, like many good magic tricks, it's so simple that it's hard to believe it could ever work. (Novice magicians often have to steel themselves to perform tricks the first time in public—it just doesn't seem possible that audiences will fall for these, but they do.) If I were designing a phony religion, I'd surely include a version of this little gem—but I'd have a hard time saying it with a straight face:

If anybody ever raises questions or objections about our religion that you cannot answer, that person is almost certainly Satan. In fact, the more reasonable the person is, the more eager to engage you in open-minded and congenial discussion, the more sure you can be that you're talking to Satan in disguise! Turn away! Do not listen! It's a trap!

What is particularly cute about this trick is that it is a perfect "wild card," so lacking in content that *any* sect or creed or conspiracy can use it effectively. Communist cells can be warned that any criticism they encounter is almost sure to be the work of FBI infiltrators in disguise, and radical feminist discussion groups can squelch any unanswerable criticism by declaring it to be phallogocentric propaganda being unwittingly spread by a brainwashed dupe of the evil

patriarchy, and so forth. This all-purpose loyalty-enforcer is paranoia in a pill, sure to keep the critics muted if not silent. Did anyone invent this brilliant adaptation, or is it a wild meme that domesticated itself by attaching itself to whatever memes were competing for hosts in its neighborhood? Nobody knows, but now it is available for anybody to use—although, if this book has any success, its virulence should diminish as people begin to recognize it for what it is.

(A milder and more constructive response to relentless skepticism is the vigorous academic industry of theological discussion and research, very respectfully inquiring into the possible interpretations of the various creeds. This earnest intellectual exercise scratches the skeptical itch of those few people who are uncomfortable with the creeds they were taught as children, and is ignored by everybody else. Most people don't feel the need to examine the details of the religious propositions they profess.)

Mystery is declared to surround the various conceptions of God, but there is nothing mysterious about the process of transformation, which is clear for all to see and has been described (and often decried) by generations of would-be stewards of this important idea. Why don't the stewards just coin new terms for the revised conceptions and let go of the traditional terms along with the discarded conceptions? After all, we don't persist in the outmoded medical terminology of *humors* and *apoplexy* or insist on finding something in contemporary physics or chemistry to identify as *phlogiston*. Nobody has proposed that we have discovered the identity of *elan vital* (the secret ingredient that distinguishes living things from mere matter); it's DNA (the vitalists just didn't have the right conception of it, but they knew there had to be something). Why do people insist on calling the Higher Power they believe in "God"? The answer is clear: the believers in the belief in God have appreciated that the continuity of *professing* requires continuity of nomenclature, that *brand loyalty* is a feature so valuable that it would be foolish to tamper with it. So, whatever other reforms you may want

to institute, don't try to replace the *word* "God" ("Jehovah," "Theos," "Deus," "the Almighty," "Our Lord," "Allah") when you tinker with your religion.<sup>6</sup> In the beginning was the Word.

I have to say that it has worked pretty well, after a fashion. For a thousand years, roughly, we've entertained a throng of variously deanthropomorphized, intellectualized concepts of God, all more or less peacefully coexisting in the minds of "believers." Since everybody calls his or her version "God," there is something "we can all agree about"—we all believe in God; we're not atheists! But of course it doesn't work *that* well. If Lucy believes that Rock (Hudson) is to die for, and Desi believes that Rock (music) is to die for, they really don't agree on anything, do they? The problem is not new. Back in the eighteenth century, Hume had already decided that "our idea of a deity" had shifted so much that the *gods* of antiquity simply didn't count, being too anthropomorphic:

To any one, who considers justly of the matter, it will appear, that the gods of all polytheists are not better than the elves and fairies of our ancestors, and merit as little any pious worship or veneration. These pretended religionists are really a kind of superstitious atheists, and acknowledge no being, that corresponds to our idea of a deity. No first principle of mind or thought: No supreme government and administration: No divine contrivance or intention in the fabric of the world. [1777, p. 33]

More recently, and chiding in the opposite direction, Stark and Finke (2000) express dismay at the "atheistic" views of John Shelby Spong, the Episcopal bishop in Newark, whose God is not anthropomorphic enough. In his 1998 book, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, Spong dismisses the divinity of Jesus, declares the crucifixion "barbaric," and opines that the God of most traditional Christians is an ogre. Another eminent Episcopal cleric once confided to me that when he found out what some Mormons believed when they said they believed in God, he rather wished they didn't believe in God! Why won't he say this from the pulpit? Because he

doesn't want to let down the side. After all, there are lots of evil, "Godless" people out there, and it would never do to upset the fragile fiction that "we are not atheists" (heaven forbid!).

## 2 God as intentional object

*The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.* —Psalms 14:1 (also 53:1)

Belief in belief in God makes people reluctant to acknowledge the obvious: that much of the traditional lore about God is no more worthy of *belief* than the lore about Santa Claus or Wonder Woman. Curiously, it's all right to laugh about it. Consider all the cartoons depicting God as a stern, bearded fellow sitting on a cloud with a pile of lightning bolts at his side, to say nothing of all the jokes, bawdy and clean, about various folks arriving in heaven and having one misadventure or another. This treasury of humor provokes hearty chuckles from all but the most stuffy puritans, but few are comfortable acknowledging just how far we've come from the God of Genesis 2:21, who literally plucks a rib from Adam and closes up the flesh (with his fingers, one imagines) before sculpting Eve on the spot. In *A Devil's Chaplain* Richard Dawkins (2003a), offers some sound advice—but knows in advance it will not be heeded, because people can see the punch line coming:

... modern theists might acknowledge that, when it comes to Baal and the Golden Calf, Thor and Wotan, Poseidon and Apollo, Mithras and Ammon Ra, they are actually atheists. We are all atheists about most of the gods that humanity has ever believed in. Some of us just go one god further, [p. 150]

The trouble is that, since this advice won't be heeded, discussions of the existence of God tend to take place in a pious fog of indeterminate boundaries. If theists would be so kind as to make a short list of all the concepts of God they renounce as balderdash before proceeding further, we atheists would know just which topics were

still on the table, but, out of a mixture of caution, loyalty, and unwillingness to offend anyone "on their side," theists typically decline to do this.<sup>7</sup> Don't put all your eggs in one basket, I guess. This double standard is enabled if not actually licensed by a logical confusion that continues to defy resolution by philosophers who have worked on it: the problem of *intentional objects*.<sup>8</sup> In a phrase (which will prove unsatisfactory, as we will soon see), intentional objects are the *things somebody can think about*.

Do I believe in witches? It all depends what you mean. If you mean evil-hearted spell-casting women who fly around supernaturally on broomsticks and wear black pointed hats, the answer is obvious: no, I no more believe in witches than I believe in the Easter Bunny or the Tooth Fairy. If you mean people, both men and women, who practice Wicca, a popular New Age cult these days, the answer is equally obvious: yes, I believe in witches; they are no more supernatural than Girl Scouts or Rotarians. Do I believe these witches cast spells? Yes and no. They sincerely utter imprecations of various sorts, expecting to alter the world in various supernatural ways, but they are mistaken in thinking they succeed, though they may alter their own attitudes and behavior thereby. (If I give you the Evil Eye, you may become seriously unnerved, to the point of serious illness, but if so, that is because you are credulous, not because I have magical powers.)<sup>9</sup> So it all depends what you mean. And does it ever!

About forty years ago, in England, I saw a BBC news program in which nursery-school children were interviewed about Queen Elizabeth II. What did they know about her? The answers were charming: the Queen wore her crown while she "hoovered" Buckingham Palace, sat on the throne when she watched telly, and in general behaved like a cross between Mum and the Queen of Hearts. *This* Queen Elizabeth II, the *intentional object* brought into existence (as an abstraction) by the consensus convictions of these children, was much more interesting and entertaining than the real woman. And a more potent political force! Are there, then, two distinct entities,

the real woman and the imagined Queen, and if so, are there not millions or billions of distinct entities—the Queen Elizabeth II believed in by teen-agers in Scotland, and the Queen Elizabeth II believed in by the staff at Windsor Castle, and *my* Queen Elizabeth II, and so on? Philosophers have argued vigorously for the better part of a century about how to accommodate such intentional objects into their ontologies—their catalogues of *the things that exist*—with no emerging consensus. Another eminent Briton is Sherlock Holmes, who is often thought about even though he never existed at all. In *one sense or another*, there are both truths and falsehoods about such (mere) intentional objects: It is true that Sherlock Holmes (the intentional object created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) lived on Baker Street and smoked, and false that he had a bright-green nose. It is true that Pegasus had wings in addition to four ordinary horse legs, and false that President Truman once owned him and rode him to the White House from Missouri. But of course neither Sherlock Holmes nor Pegasus is or ever was real.

Some people may be under the mistaken impression that Sherlock Holmes actually existed and that Conan Doyle's stories aren't fiction. These people believe in Sherlock Holmes in the strong sense (let us say). Others, known as "Sherlockians," devote their spare time to becoming Sherlock Holmes scholars, and can entertain one another with their encyclopedic knowledge of the Conan Doyle canon, without ever making the mistake of confusing fact with fiction. The most famous society of these scholars is the Baker Street Irregulars, named after the gang of street urchins that Holmes enlisted for various purposes over the years. Members of these societies (for there are many "Sherlockian" societies around the world) delight in knowing which train Holmes took from Paddington on May 12, but know full well that there simply is no fact to be learned about whether he faced forward or backward in the train, since Conan Doyle didn't specify it or anything that would imply it. They know that Holmes is a fictional character, but nevertheless they devote large parts of their lives to studying him, and

are eager to explain why their love of Holmes is better justified than some other fan's love of Perry Mason or Batman. They believe in Sherlock Holmes in the weak sense (let us say). They behave very much like the amateur scholars who devote their spare time to trying to figure out who Jack the Ripper was, and an observer who didn't know that the Holmes stories are fiction whereas Jack the Ripper was a real murderer might naturally suppose that the Baker Street Irregulars were investigating a historical person.

It is quite possible for a *mere* intentional object like Sherlock Holmes to obsess people even when they know full well that it isn't real. So it is not surprising that such a thing (if it's right, in the end, to call it a kind of *thing* at all) can dominate people's lives when they believe in it in the strong sense, such as the people who spend fortunes hunting for the Loch Ness Monster or Bigfoot. And whenever a real person, such as Queen Elizabeth II, dominates people's lives, this domination is *usually* accomplished indirectly, by setting up a manifold of beliefs, giving people an intentional object that is featured in their thinking and the decisions they make. I can't hate my rival or love my neighbor without having a pretty clear and largely accurate set of beliefs that serve to pick this person out of the crowd so I can recognize, track, and interact effectively with him or her.

In most circumstances, the things we believe in are perfectly real, and the things that are real we believe in, so we can usually ignore the logical distinction between an intentional object (the object of belief) and the thing in the world that inspired/caused/grounds/anchors the belief. Not always. The Morning Star turns out to be none other than the Evening Star. "They" are not stars; "they" are one and the same thing—namely, the planet Venus. One planet, two intentional objects? Usually the things that matter to us make themselves securely known to us in a variety of ways that permit us to track them through their trajectories, but other scenarios do occur. I *might* sneak around thwarting your projects, or, alternatively, giving you "good luck," dominating your life one way or another without your ever suspecting that I existed as a *person* or a

*thing* or even *a force* in your life, but this is an unlikely possibility. In the main, things that make a difference in a person's life figure in it as intentional objects one way or another, however misidentified or misconstrued. When misconstruals occur, problems arise about how to describe the situation. Suppose you've been surreptitiously doing me good deeds for months. If I "thank my lucky stars" when it is really *you* I should be thanking, it would misrepresent the situation to say that I believe in you and am grateful to you. Maybe I am a fool to say in my heart that it is only my lucky stars that I should thank—saying, in other words, that there is nobody to thank—but that *is* what I believe; there is no intentional object in this case to be identified as you.

Suppose instead that I was convinced that I did have a secret helper but that it wasn't you—it was Cameron Diaz. As I penned my thank-you notes to her, and thought lovingly about her, and marveled at her generosity to me, it would surely be misleading to say that *you* were the object of my gratitude, even though you were in fact the one who did the deeds that I am so grateful for. And then suppose I gradually began to suspect that I had been ignorant and mistaken, and eventually came to the correct realization that you were indeed the proper recipient of my gratitude. Wouldn't it be strange for me to put it this way: "Now I understand: you are Cameron Diaz!" It would indeed be strange; it would be false—unless something else had happened in the interim. Suppose my acquaintances had become so used to my singing the praises of Cameron Diaz and her bountiful works that the term had come, to them and to me, to stand for *whoever it was* who was responsible for my joy. In that case, those syllables would no longer have their original use or meaning. The syllables "Cameron Diaz," purportedly a proper name of a real individual, would have been turned—gradually and imperceptibly—into a sort of wild-card referring expression, the "name" of whoever (or whatever) is responsible for . . . whatever it is I am grateful for. But, then, if the term were truly open-ended in this way, when I thank "my lucky stars" I am thanking exactly the

same thing as when I think "Cameron Diaz"—and you do turn out to be my Cameron Diaz. The Morning Star turns out to be the Evening Star. (How to turn an atheist into a theist by just fooling around with the words—if "God" were just the name of *whatever it is* that produced all creatures great and small, then God might turn out to fee the process of evolution by natural selection.)

This ambiguity has been exploited ever since the psalmist sang about the fool. The fool doesn't know what he's talking about when he says in his heart there is no God, so he's ignorant in the same way as somebody who thinks that Shakespeare didn't actually write *Hamlet*. (Somebody did; if Shakespeare is *by definition* the author of *Hamlet*, then perhaps Marlowe was Shakespeare, etc.) When people write books about "the history of God" (Armstrong, 1993; Stark, 2001; Debray, 2004, are recent examples), they are actually writing about the history of the *concept* of God, of course, tracing the fashions and controversies about God as intentional object through the centuries. Such a historical survey can be neutral in *two* regards: it can be neutral about which concept of God is *correct* (did Shakespeare write *Hamlet* or did Marlowe write *Hamlet*?), and it can be neutral about whether the whole enterprise concerns fact or fiction (are we the Baker Street Irregulars or are we trying to identify a real murderer?). Rodney Stark opens *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* with a passage that brandishes this ambiguity:

All of the great monotheisms propose that their God works through history, and I plan to show that, at least sociologically, they are quite right: that a great deal of history—triumphs as well as disasters—has been made on behalf of One True God. What could be more obvious? [2001, p. 1]

His title suggests that he is not neutral—one *true* God—but the entire book is written "sociologically"—which means that it is not about God, it is about the intentional objects that do all the political and psychological lifting, the God of the Catholics, the God of the

Jews, the God of teen-agers living in Scotland, perhaps. It is indeed obvious that God the intentional object has played a potent role, but that says nothing about whether God exists, and it is disingenuous of Stark to hide behind the ambiguity. The history of disagreement has not all been good clean fun, after all, like the Baker Street Irregulars versus the Perry Mason Fan Club. People have died for their theories. Stark may be neutral, but the comedian Rich Jeni isn't; as he sees it, religious war is pathetic: "You're basically killing each other to see who's got the better imaginary friend." What is Stark's opinion about that? And what is yours? Might it be all right, even obligatory, to fight for a *concept*, whether or not the concept refers to anything real? After all, one might add, hasn't the strife brought us a bounty of great art and literature, in the arms race of competitive glorification?

I find that some people who consider themselves believers actually just believe in the *concept* of God. I myself believe that the concept exists—as Stark says, what could be more obvious? These people believe, moreover, that the concept is worth fighting over. Notice that they *don't* believe in *belief* in God! They are far too sophisticated for that; they are like the Baker Street Irregulars, who don't believe in *belief* in Sherlock Holmes, but just in studying and extolling the lore. They do think that their concept of God is so much better than other concepts of God that they should devote themselves to spreading the Word. But they don't believe in God in the strong sense.

By definition, one would think, theists believe in God. (*Atheism* is the negation of *theism*, after all.) But there is little hope of conducting an effective investigation into the question of whether God exists when there are self-described theists who "think that providing a satisfactory theistic ethics requires giving up the idea that God is some kind of supernatural entity" (Ellis, 2004). If God is not some kind of supernatural entity, then *who knows* whether you or I believe in him (it)? Beliefs in Sherlock Holmes, Pegasus, witches on broomsticks—these are the easy cases, and they can be quite

readily sorted out with a little attention to detail. When it comes to God, on the other hand, there is no straightforward way of cutting through the fog of misunderstanding to arrive at a consensus about the topic under consideration. And there are interesting reasons why people resist having a specific definition of God foisted on them (even for the sake of argument). The mists of incomprehension and failure of communication are not just annoying impediments to rigorous refutation; they are themselves design features of religions worth looking at closely on their own.

### 3 The division of doxastic labor

*Fake it until you make it.* —Alcoholics Anonymous

*So we have the strange phenomenon, as Kant assures us, of a mind believing with all its strength in the real presence of a set of things of no one of which it can form any notion whatsoever.*

—William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

Language gives us many gifts, including the capacity to memorize, transmit, cherish, and in general *protect* formulas that we don't understand. Here is a sentence I firmly believe to be true:

(1) *Her insan dogar, yasar, ve olur.*

I haven't the foggiest idea what (1) means, but I know it's true, because I asked a trusted Turkish colleague to provide me with a true sentence for just this purpose. I would bet a large sum of money on the truth of this sentence—that's how sure I am that it's true. But as I say, I don't know whether (1) is about trees, or people, or history, or chemistry,... or God. There is nothing metaphysically peculiar, or difficult, or unseemly, or embarrassing about my state of mind. I just don't know what proposition this sentence expresses, because I'm not "expert" in Turkish. In chapter 7, I noted the methodological problems confronting anthropologists intent on

understanding other cultures, and suggested that part of the problem is that individual informants may not view themselves as experts on the doctrines they are asked to elucidate. The problems that arise for such "half-understood ideas" are exacerbated in the case of religious doctrines, but are as often encountered in science as in religion.

Here, one might say, is the ultimate division of labor, the division of *doxastic* labor, made possible by language: we laypeople do the believing—we sign on to the *doxology*—and defer the understanding of those *dogmas* to the experts! Consider the ultimate talismanic formula of science:

$$(2) \qquad E = mc^2$$

Do you believe that  $E = mc^2$ ? I do. We all know that this is Einstein's great equation, and the heart, somehow, of his theory of relativity, and many of us know what the  $E$  and  $m$  and  $c$  stand for, and could even work out the basic algebraic relationships and detect obvious errors in interpreting it. But only a tiny fraction of those who know that " $E = mc^2$ " is a fundamental truth of physics actually understand it in any substantive way. Fortunately, the rest of us don't have to; we have expert physicists around to whom we have gratefully delegated responsibility for understanding the formula. What we are doing, in these instances, is not really *believing the proposition*. For that, you'd have to *understand* the proposition. What we are doing is believing that *whatever proposition is expressed by the formula " $E = mc^2$ " is true*.<sup>10</sup>

The difference for me between (1) and (2) is that I know quite a lot—but not enough!—about what (2) is about. In the infinite space of all possible propositions, I can narrow down its meaning to a rather tight cluster of nearly identical variants. A physicist could probably trip me up by getting me to endorse an *almost right* paraphrase that would reveal my ignorance (that's what really tough multiple-choice exams can do, separating the students who really

understand the material from those who only sort of understand the material). With (1), however, all I know is that it expresses one of the true propositions—cutting the infinite space of propositions in half, but still leaving infinitely many propositions indistinguishable by me as its best interpretation. (I can guess that it is probably not about how the Red Sox beat the Yankees four straight to win the American League Championship in October 2004, but such whitening away doesn't take us far.)

I drew an example from science to show that this is not an embarrassing foible of religious belief alone. Even scientists rely every day on formulas that they know to be correct but are not themselves expert in interpreting. And they sometimes even foster the separation of understanding and memorization. A vivid instance can be found in Richard Feynman's classic introductory lectures on quantum electrodynamics, *QED: The Strange Theory of Light and Matter* (1985), in which he amusingly cajoles his audience to loosen their grip and not try to understand the method he is teaching:

So now you know what I'm going to talk about. The next question is, will you *understand* what I'm going to tell you?... No, you're not going to be able to understand it. Why, then, am I going to bother you with all this? Why are you going to sit here all this time, when you won't be able to understand what I am going to say? It is my task to convince you *not* to turn away because you don't understand it. You see, my physics students don't understand it either. That is because *I* don't understand it. Nobody does.... It's a problem that physicists have learned to deal with: they've learned to realize that whether they like a theory or they don't like a theory is *not* the essential question. Rather, it is whether or not the theory gives predictions that agree with experiment. It is not a question of whether a theory is philosophically delightful, or easy to understand, or perfectly reasonable from the point of view of common sense.... Please don't

turn yourself off because you can't believe Nature is so strange. Just hear me all out, and I hope you'll be as delighted as I am when we're through. [pp. 9-10]

He goes on to describe the methods of calculating probability amplitudes in terms that deliberately discourage understanding—"You will have to brace yourselves for this—not because it is difficult to understand, but because it is absolutely ridiculous: All we do is draw little arrows on a piece of paper—that's all!" (p. 24)—but defends this because the results the methods yield are so impressively accurate: "To give you a feeling for the accuracy of these numbers, it comes out to something like this: If you were to measure the distance from Los Angeles to New York to this accuracy, it would be exact to the thickness of a human hair. That's how delicately quantum electrodynamics has, in the past fifty years, been checked—both theoretically and experimentally" (p. 7).

And *that* is the most important difference between the division of labor in religion and science: in spite of Feynman's uncharacteristically hypermodest denial, the experts *do* understand the methods they use—not everything about them, but enough to explain to one another and to themselves why the amazingly accurate results come out of them. It is only because I am confident that the experts really do understand the formulas that I can honestly and unabashedly cede the responsibility of pinning down the propositions (and hence understanding them) to them. In religion, however, the experts are not exaggerating for effect when they say they don't understand what they are talking about. The fundamental incomprehensibility of God is insisted upon as a central tenet of faith, and the propositions in question are themselves declared to be systematically elusive to everybody. Although we can go along with the experts when they advise us which sentences to say we believe, they also insist that *they themselves* cannot use their expertise to prove—even to one another—that they know what they are talking about. These matters are mysterious *to everybody*, experts and laypeople alike. Why

does anybody go along with this? The answer is obvious: *belief in belief*.

Many people believe in God. Many people believe in *belief in God*. What's the difference? People who believe in God are sure that God exists, and they are glad, because they hold God to be the most wonderful of all things. People who moreover believe in belief in God are sure that *belief in God* exists (and who could doubt that?), and they think that this is a good state of affairs, something to be strongly encouraged and fostered wherever possible: If only *belief in God* were more widespread! One *ought* to believe in God. One ought to *strive* to believe in God. One should be uneasy, apologetic, unfulfilled, one should even feel guilty, if one finds that one just doesn't believe in God. It's a failing, but it happens.

It is entirely possible to be an atheist and believe in belief in God. Such a person doesn't believe in God but nevertheless thinks that believing in God would be a wonderful state of mind to be in, if only that could be arranged. People who believe in belief in God try to get others to believe in God and, whenever they find their own belief in God flagging, do whatever they can to restore it.

It is rare but possible for people to believe in something while regretting their belief in it. They don't believe in their own belief! (If I found that I believed in poltergeists or the Loch Ness Monster, I'd be, well, embarrassed. I'd think of this as one of those dirty little secrets about me that I wished were not so, and I'd be glad that nobody else knew! I might take steps to cure myself of this awkward bulge in my otherwise impeccably hardheaded and rational ontology.) People sometimes suddenly awake to the fact that they are racists, or sexists, or have lost their love of democracy. None of us want to discover these things about ourselves. We all have ideals by which we measure the beliefs we discover in ourselves, and belief in God has been one of the most salient ideals for a long time for many people.

In general, if you believe some proposition, you also believe that anybody who disbelieves it is mistaken. And by and large, it's too

bad when people are mistaken or ill informed or ignorant. In general, the world would be a better place if people shared more truths and believed fewer falsehoods. That's why we have education and public-information campaigns and newspapers and so forth. There are exceptions—strategic secrets, for instance, cases where I believe something and am grateful that nobody else shares my belief. Some religious beliefs may consist in proprietary secrets, but the general pattern is for people not just to share but to try to persuade others, especially their own children, of their religious beliefs.

#### 4 The lowest common denominator?

*God is so great that the greatness precludes existence.*

—Raimundo Panikkar, *The Silence of God*

*It is the final proof of God's omnipotence that he need not exist in order to save us.*

—Sermon by the hyperliberal Reverend Mackerel, hero of *The Mackerel Plaza*,  
by Peter De Vries

*The Church Militant and the Church Triumphant has become the Church Social and the Church Bizarre.*

—Robert Benson, personal communication, 1960

Many people believe in God. Many *more* people believe in belief in God! (We can be quite sure that, since just about everybody who believes in God also believes in belief in God, there are actually more people in the world who believe in belief in God than those who believe in God.) The world's literature—including uncounted sermons and homilies—teems with tales of people wracked with doubt and hoping to recover their belief in God. We've just seen that our concept of belief allows that there is a clear empirical difference between these two states of mind, but here is a perplexing question: of all the people who believe in belief in God, what percentage

(roughly!) also actually believe in God? Investigating this empirical question turns out to be extremely difficult.

Why? At first it looks as if we could simply give people a questionnaire with a multiple-choice question on it:

*I believe in God:* \_\_\_\_\_ *Yes* \_\_\_\_\_ *No* \_\_\_\_\_ *I don't know*

Or should the question be:

*God exists:* \_\_\_\_\_ *Yes* \_\_\_\_\_ *No* \_\_\_\_\_ *I don't know*

Would it make any difference how we framed the questions? (I have begun conducting research on just such questions, and the results are tantalizing but not yet sufficiently confirmed to publish.) The main problem with such a simple approach is obvious. Given the way religious concepts and practices have been designed, the very behaviors that would be clear evidence of belief in God are also behaviors that would be clear evidence of (only) belief in belief in God. If those who have doubts have been enjoined by their church to declare their belief in spite of their doubts, to *say the words* with as much conviction as they can muster, again and again, in hopes of kindling conviction, to join hands and recite the creed, to pray several times a day in public, to do all the things that a believer does, then they will check the "Yes" box with alacrity, even though they really don't believe in God; they fervently believe in belief in God. This fact makes it hard to tell who—if anybody!—actually believes in God in addition to believing in belief in God.

Thanks to the division of labor, it is actually worse than that, as you may already have fathomed. You may find that when you look in your heart you simply do not know whether you *yourself* believe in God. Which God are we talking about? Unless you are an expert, and sure that you understand the formulas that officially express the propositions of your creed, your state of mind must be somewhere in the middle ground between my state of mind with regard to (1) (the sentence in Turkish) and my state of mind with regard to (2) (Einstein's formula). You're not as clueless as I am

regarding (1); you have studied and probably even memorized the official formulas, and you believe that these formulas are true (whatever they mean), but you have to admit that you are no *authority* on what they mean. Many Americans find themselves in this position, as Alan Wolfe notes in *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith*, his recent survey of developments in American religion: "These are people who believe, often passionately, in God, even if they cannot tell others all that much about the God in which they believe" (2003, p. 72). If you fall in this category, you must admit, contrary to the way Wolfe puts it, that, although you may well be one of those who believe in belief in God, you aren't really in a good position to judge whether you actually believe (passionately or otherwise) in the God of your particular creed, *or* in some other God. (And you have almost certainly never taken a tough multiple-choice test to see if you can reliably distinguish the expert's conception of God from the subtle impostors that are almost right.)

Alternatively, you can set yourself up as your own authority: "I know what *I* mean when I utter the creed, and that's good enough for me!" And that's good enough—these days—for a surprising number of organized religions, too. Their leaders have come to realize that the robustness of the institution of religion doesn't depend *on* uniformity of *belief* at all; *it* depends on the uniformity of *professing*. This has long been a feature of some strains of Judaism: fake it and *never mind* if you make it (as my student Uriel Meshoulam once vividly put it to me). Recognizing that the very idea of commanding someone to *believe* something is incoherent on its face, an invitation to insincerity or self-deception, many Jewish congregations reject the demand for *orthodoxy*, right *belief*, and settle for *orthopraxy*, right *behavior*. Instead of creating secret pockets of festering guilty skepticism, they make a virtue of candid doubt, respectfully expressed.

*As long as the formulas get transmitted down through the ages, the*

*memes will survive and flourish.* Much the same attitude has recently been adopted by many evangelical Christian denominations, especially the booming new phenomenon of "mega-churches," which, as Wolfe describes in some detail, go out of their way to give their members plenty of elbow room for personal interpretations of the words they claim to be holy. Wolfe distinguishes sharply between evangelicalism and fundamentalism, which "tends to be more pre-occupied with matters of theological substance." His conclusion is intended to be reassuring:

But those who fear the consequences for the United States of a return to strong religious belief should not be fooled by evangelicalism's rapid growth. On the contrary, evangelicalism's popularity is due as much to its populist and democratic urges—its determination to find out exactly what believers want and to offer it to them—as it is to certainties of the faith. [2003, p. 36]

Wolfe shows that Stark and Finke's frank marketing approach is not at all foreign to religious leaders themselves. He notes without irony some of the concessions they are willing to make to contemporary secular culture, concessions that go far beyond Web sites and multimillion-dollar television programs, or the introduction of electric guitars, drums, and PowerPoint in their services. For instance, the term "sanctuary" is shunned by one church "because of its strong religious connotations" (p. 28), and more attention is paid to providing plenty of free parking and babysitting than to the proper interpretation of passages of Scripture. Wolfe has conducted many probing interviews with his informants, and they reveal that *revision* of tradition is often hard to distinguish from outright *rejection*. A derisive term has been coined by these memetic engineers to describe the image they are trying hard to shed: "churchianity" (p. 50).

Indeed, Lars and Ann, like many evangelicals throughout the country, say that faith is so important to them that "religion"—

which they associate with discord and disagreement and, therefore, if often in an unexpected way, with doctrine—cannot be allowed to interfere with its exercise. [p. 73]

There is no denying the results of this marketing expertise. Pastor Chuck Smith's Calvary Chapel has over six hundred churches, some of them with ten thousand worshipers a week (Wolfe, 2003, p. 75). Dr. Creflo Dollar's World Changers Church has twenty-five thousand members, "but only thirty per cent of them were regular tithers" (Sanneh, 2004, p. 48). According to Wolfe, "All of America's religions face the same imperative: Personalize or die. Each does so in different ways" (p. 35). He may be right, but his argument for this sweeping conclusion is sketchy and anecdotal, and though there can be no doubt that the phenomena he describes exist, the question of whether they will be permanent features of religion from now on or a passing fad is a question that cries out for a testable theory, not just a set of observations, however sensitive. Whatever its staying power, and the reasons for it, the example of such *laissez-faire* "noncredal" religion contrasts vividly with the continuing doctrinal emphasis of the Roman Catholic Church.

## 5 Beliefs designed to be professed

*A mountain climber foolishly climbing alone slips off a precipice and finds himself dangling at the end of his safety rope, a thousand feet above a ravine. Unable to climb the rope or swing to a safe resting spot, he calls out in despair. "Halloo, halloo! Can anybody help me?" To his astonishment, the clouds part, a beautiful light pours through them, and a mighty voice replies, "Yes, my son, I can help you. Take your knife and cut the rope!" The climber takes out his knife, and then he stops, and thinks and thinks. Then he cries out: "Can anybody else help me?"*

According to the old maxim, actions speak louder than words, but this actually doesn't say what it means. Speech acts are actions, too,

and a person who says, for instance, that infidels deserve death is performing an action with potentially deadly effects, which is about as "loud" as acting can get. What the maxim means, on reflection, is that actions other than speech acts are typically better evidence of what the actor really believes than any words the actor might say. It is easy enough to pay lip service (such a wonderful idiom!), but when the concrete consequences of your actions depend on whether you believe something—whether you believe the gun is loaded, whether you believe the door is unlocked, whether you believe you are unobserved—lip service is a puny datum easily swamped by the nonverbal behavior that expresses—indeed, betrays—your true beliefs.

And here is an interesting fact: the transition from folk religion to organized religion is marked by a shift in beliefs from those with very clear, concrete consequences to those with systematically elusive consequences—paying lip service is just about the only way you *can* act on them. If you really believe that the rain god won't provide rain unless you sacrifice an ox, you sacrifice an ox if you want it to rain. If you really believe that your tribe's god has made you invulnerable to arrows, you readily run headlong into a swarm of deadly arrows to get at your enemy. If you really believe that your God will save you, you cut the rope. If you really believe that your God is watching you and doesn't want you to masturbate, you don't masturbate. (You wouldn't masturbate with your mother watching you! How on earth could you masturbate with God watching you? Do you *really* believe God is watching you? Perhaps not.)

But what could you do to show that you really believe that the wine in the chalice has been transformed into the blood of Christ? You could bet a large sum of money on it and then send the wine to the biology lab to see if there was hemoglobin in it (and recover the genome of Jesus from the DNA in the bargain!)—except that the creed has been cleverly shielded from just such concrete tests. It would be a sacrilege to remove the wine from the ceremony, and, besides, taking the wine out of the holy context would surely

untransubstantiate it, turning it back into ordinary wine. There is really only one action you can take to demonstrate this belief: you can *say* that you believe it, over and over, as fervently as the occasion demands.

This topic is broached in a telling way in "Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church," a Declaration written by Cardinal Ratzinger (who later was elected Pope Benedict XVI), and ratified by Pope John Paul II at a plenary session on June 16, 2000. Again and again this document specifies what faithful Catholics must "*firmly believe*" (italics in the original), but at several points the Declaration shifts idiom and speaks of what "the Catholic faithful *are required to profess*" (italics in the original). As a professor myself, I find the use of this verb irresistible. What is commonly referred to as "religious belief or "religious conviction" might less misleadingly be called *religious professing*. Unlike academic professors, religious professors (not just priests, but all the faithful) may not either understand or believe what they are professing. They are *just* professing, because that is the best they can do, and they are *required* to profess. Cardinal Ratzinger cites Paul's letter to the Corinthians: "Preaching the Gospel is not a reason for me to boast; it is a necessity laid on me; woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (1 Corinthians 9:16).

Though lip service is thus required, it is not enough: you must *firmly believe* what you are obliged to say. How is it possible to obey this injunction? Professing is voluntary, but belief is not. Belief—when it is distinguished from believing that some sentence expresses a truth—requires understanding, which is hard to come by, even by the experts in these matters. You can't just make yourself believe something by trying, so what are you to do? Cardinal Ratzinger's Declaration offers some help on this score: "Faith is the acceptance in grace of revealed truth, which 'makes it possible to penetrate the mystery in a way that allows us to understand it coherently' [quoting John Paul II's Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*,

p. 13]." So you should believe *this*. And if you can, believing this should help you believe you do understand the mystery (even if it seems to you that you don't), and hence do firmly believe whatever it is you profess you believe. But how do you believe *this*? It takes faith.

Why even try? What if you personally don't happen to share the belief in the belief in the doctrine in question? Here is where the meme's-eye view can provide some explanation. In his original discussion of memes, Dawkins had noted this problem and its traditional solution: "Many children and even some adults believe that they will suffer ghastly torments after death if they do not obey the priestly rules.... The idea of hell fire is, quite simply, *self-perpetuating*, because of its own deep psychological impact" (Dawkins, 1976, p. 212). If you have ever received a chain letter that warned of the terrible things that would happen to you if you failed to pass it along, you can appreciate the strategy, even if you didn't fall for it. The assurances of a trusted priest can be much more compelling.

If hellfire is the stick, mystery is the carrot. The propositions to be believed ought to be baffling! As Rappaport has trenchantly put it, "If postulates are to be unquestionable, it is important that they be incomprehensible" (1979, p. 165). Not just *counterintuitive*, in Boyer's technical sense of contradicting only one or two of the default assumptions of a basic category, but downright unintelligible. Prosaic assertions have no bite, and moreover they are too readily checked for accuracy. For a truly awesome and mind-teasing proposition, there is nothing that beats a paradox eagerly avowed. In a later essay, Dawkins drew attention to what we might call the inflation of *credal athleticism*, the boast that my faith is so strong that I can mentally embrace a bigger paradox than you can.

It is easy and non-mysterious to believe that in some symbolic or metaphorical sense the eucharistic wine turns into the blood of

Christ. The Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, however, claims far more. The "whole substance" of the wine is converted into the blood of Christ; the appearance of wine that remains is "merely accidental", "inhering in no substance". Transubstantiation is colloquially taught as meaning that the wine "literally" turns into the blood of Christ. [Dawkins, 1993, p. 21]<sup>11</sup>

There are several reasons why this inflation into incomprehensibility would be an adaptation that would enhance the fitness of a meme. First, as just noted, it tends to evoke wonder and draw attention to itself. It is a veritable peacock's tail of extravagant display, and memetics would predict that something like an arms race of paradoxology should ensue when religions confront waning allegiance. Peacocks' tails are finally limited by the sheer physical inability of the peacocks to carry around still larger ones, and paradoxology must hit the wall, too. People's discomfort with sheer incoherence is strong, so there are always tantalizing elements of sense-making narrative, punctuated with seriously perplexing nuggets of incomprehensibility. The anomalies give the host brains something to gnaw on, like an unresolved musical cadence, and hence something to rehearse, and rehearse again, and baffle themselves deliriously about.<sup>12</sup> Second, as noted in chapter 5, incomprehensibility discourages paraphrase—which can be death to meme identity—by leaving the host with no viable choice but *verbatim* transmission. ("I don't really know what Pope John Paul II *meant*, but I can tell you that what he *said* was: 'Jesus is the Incarnate Word—a single and indivisible person.'")

Dawkins has noted an extension or refinement of this adaptation: "The meme for blind faith secures its own perpetuation by the simple unconscious expedient of discouraging rational inquiry" (1976, pp. 212-13). At a time when "faith-based initiatives" and other such uses of the term have made "faith" almost synonymous in the minds of many with the term "religion" (as in the phrase "people of all faiths"), it is important to remind ourselves that not

all religions have a home for the concept or anything even very close to it. The meme for faith exhibits *frequency-dependent fitness*: it flourishes particularly in the company of rationalistic memes. In a neighborhood with few skeptics, the meme for faith does not attract much attention, and hence tends to go dormant in minds, and hence is seldom reintroduced into the memosphere (Dennett, 1995b, p. 349). Indeed, it is mainly a Christian feature, and as we recently noted, Judaism has actually encouraged vigorous intellectual debate over the meaning, and even the truth, of many of its holy texts. But a similar athleticism is honored in Jewish practice, as explained by a rabbi:

That most of the Kashrut [kosher] laws are divine ordinances without reason given is 100 per cent to the point. It is very easy not to murder people. Very easy. It is a little bit harder not to steal because one is tempted occasionally. So that is not great proof that I believe in God or am fulfilling His will. But, if He tells me not to have a cup of coffee with milk in it with my mincemeat and peas at lunchtime, that is a test. The only reason I am doing that is because I have been told to so do. It is doing something difficult. [*Guardian*, July 29, 1991, quoted in Dawkins, 1993, p. 22]

Islam, meanwhile, obliges its faithful to stop what they are doing five times a day to pray, no matter how inconvenient or even dangerous that act of loyalty proves to be. This idea that we prove our faith by one extravagant act or another—such as choosing death over recanting an item of doctrine that we don't understand—permits us to draw a strong distinction between religious faith and the sort of faith that I, for one, have in science. My faith in the expertise of physicists like Richard Feynman, for instance, permits me to endorse—and, if it comes to it, bet heavily on the truth of—a proposition that I don't understand. So far, my faith is not unlike religious faith, but I am not in the slightest bit motivated to go to my death rather than recant the formulas of physics. Watch:

E *doesn't* equal  $mc^2$ , it *doesn't*, it *doesn't!* I was lying, so there!

I feel no guilt in making this little joke, unlike people who would find it deeply difficult to utter blasphemous words or recant their creed. But isn't my faith in the truth of the propositions of quantum mechanics that I admit I don't understand a sort of *religious* faith in any case? Let me invent a deeply religious person, Professor Faith,<sup>13</sup> to give a little speech that articulates this charge. Professor Faith wants to teach me a new word, "apophatic":

God is a Something that is Wonderful. He is an appropriate recipient of prayers, and that's about all we can say about Him. My concept of God is *apophatic!* What, you may ask, does that mean? It means I *define* God as ineffable, unknowable, something beyond all human ken. Listen to what Simon Oliver, writing about Denys Turner's recent book, *Faith Seeking* (2003), has to say:

... the God rejected by modern atheism is not the God of orthodox, pre-modern Christianity. God is not any kind of thing whose existence might be rejected in the way that one might reject the existence of Santa Claus. Turner's God—owing much to the medieval mystics—is profoundly apophatic, wholly other and, in the end, unknowable darkness. We begin our journey into that alterity in our realization that our being is a gracious gift. [p. 32]

And here is Raimundo Panikkar, writing about Buddhism:

The term "apophatic" is usually used in reference to an epistemological apophaticism, positing merely that the ultimate reality is *ineffable*—that human intelligence is incapable of grasping, of embracing it—although this ultimate reality itself may be represented as *intelligible*, even supremely intelligible, *in se*. A gnoseological apophaticism, then, comports an ineffability on the part of the ultimate reality only *quoad nos*. Buddhistic apophaticism, on the other hand, seeks to transport this ineffability to the heart of ultimate reality itself, declaring that this

reality—inasmuch as its *logos* (its expression and communication) no longer pertains to the order of ultimate reality but precisely to the manifestation of that order—is ineffable not merely in our regard, but as such, *quoad se*. Thus Buddhistic apophaticism is an ontic apophaticism. [1989, p. 14]

I claim that these claims really aren't so different from what your scientists say. Physicists have come to realize that matter isn't composed of clusters of hard little spheres (atoms). Matter is much stranger than that, they acknowledge, but still they call it matter, even though they mainly know what matter *isn't*, not what it is. They're still calling them atoms, but they no longer think of them as, well, *atomic*. They've changed their conception of atoms, their conception of matter, quite radically. And if you ask them what they now think matter is, they confess that it's something of a mystery. *Their* concept is apophatic, too! If physicists can move from concreteness to mystery, so can theologians.

I hope Professor Faith has done justice to this theme, which I have often encountered in discussion. I am not at all persuaded by it. There is a big difference between religious faith and scientific faith: what has driven the changes in concepts in physics is not just heightened skepticism from an increasingly worldly and sophisticated clientele, but a tidal wave of exquisitely detailed positive results—the sorts of borne-out predictions that Feynman pointed to in defending his field. And this makes a huge difference because it gives beliefs about the truths of physics a place where the rubber meets the road, where there is more than mere professing that can be done. For instance, you can build something that *depends for its safe operation on the truth of those sentences* and risk your life trying to fly it to the moon. Like the folk religionists' beliefs that they should sacrifice a goat or that they are invulnerable to arrows, these are beliefs that you can act on in ways that speak louder than words. People who give away all their belongings and climb to some mountaintop in anticipation of the imminent End of the World

don't just believe in belief in God, but they are the exceptions, not the rule, when it comes to religious convictions.

## 6 Lessons from Lebanon: the strange cases of the Druze and Kim Philby

There is still more that is systematically curious about the phenomenon that people *call* religious belief but that might better be called religious *professing*. This is a feature that has long captivated me, while further persuading me that Hume's project of natural religion (evaluating arguments for and against the existence of God) is largely wasted effort. My interest in this feature grew out of two experiences, both of which involve events that took place in Lebanon more than forty years ago (though that is a sheer coincidence, so far as I know). I spent some of my earliest days in Beirut, where my father, a historian of Islam, was cultural attache (and a spy for the OSS). The rhythm of the muezzins calling the faithful to prayer from the nearby minaret was my everyday experience, along with my teddy bear and toy trucks, and the beautifully haunting call never fails to send chills through me when I hear it today. But I left Beirut when I was only five, and didn't return until 1964, when I visited my mother and sister, who were living there then. We spent some time in the mountains outside Beirut in a village that was mostly Druze, with some Christians and Muslims thrown in. I asked some of the non-Druze residents of the town to tell me about the Druze religion, and this is what they said:

Oh, the Druze are a very sad lot. The first principle of the Druze religion is to lie to outsiders about their beliefs—never tell the truth to an infidel! So you shouldn't take anything a Druze tells you as authoritative. Some of us think, in fact, that the Druze used to have a holy book, their own scripture, but they lost it, and they are so embarrassed by this that they make up all manner of solemn nonsense to keep this from coming out. You will notice

that the women don't participate at all in the Druze ceremonies;  
that's because they couldn't keep such a secret!

I heard this tale from several people who claimed to know, and I also heard it denied by a few Druze, of course. But if it was true, this would create a dilemma for any anthropologist: the usual method of questioning informants would be a hopeless wild-goose chase, and if he made the ultimate sacrifice and converted to Druze himself so as to gain entrance to the inner sanctum, he would have to admit that we on the outside shouldn't believe his scholarly treatise, *What the Druze Really Believe*, since it was written by a devout Druze (and everybody knows that the Druze lie). As a young philosopher, I was fascinated by this real-life version of the liar paradox (Epimenides the Cretan says that all Cretans are liars; does he speak the truth?), and also by the unmistakable echoes of another famous example in philosophy; Ludwig Wittgenstein's beetle in the box. In *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Wittgenstein says:

Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a "beetle." No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle.— Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. —But suppose the word "beetle" had a use in these people's language? —If so it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a *something*: for the box might even be empty. —No, one can "divide through" by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is. [Section 293]

Much has been written on Wittgenstein's beetle box, but I don't know if anybody has ever proposed an application to religious belief. In any case, it seems fantastic at first that the Druze might be an actual example of the phenomenon. Am I just inflating a mean-spirited calumny of the Druze by their neighbors to make a

dubious philosophical point? Perhaps, but consider what Scott Atran has to say about his attempts, as an anthropologist, to write about the beliefs of the Druze:

As a graduate student almost three decades ago, I spent some years with the Druze people of the Middle East. I wanted to learn about their religious beliefs, which appeared to weave together ideas from all the great monotheistic faiths in intriguing ways. Learning about Druze religion is a gradual process in the Socratic tradition, involving interpretation of parables in question-and-answer format. Although, as a non-Druze, I could never be formally initiated into the religion, the elders seemed to delight in my trying to understand the world as they conceived it. But every time I reached some level of awareness about a problem, Druze elders reminded me that anything said or learned beyond that point could not be discussed with uninitiated persons, including other Druze. I never did write on Druze religion and wound up with a thesis on the cognitive bases of science. [2002, p. ix]

It seems that we still don't know what the Druze really believe. We may begin to wonder if they themselves know. And we may also begin to wonder if it matters, which brings me to my second lesson from Lebanon.

In 1951, Kim Philby, a senior officer in the British intelligence service (SIS), fell under suspicion of being a double agent, a highly placed traitor working for the Soviet KGB. A secret tribunal was held by SIS, but Philby was found not guilty on the evidence presented. Although SIS had been unable to convict him, they quite reasonably refused to reinstate him to his most sensitive position, and he resigned, and moved to Lebanon, to work as a journalist. In 1963, a Soviet defector to London confirmed Philby's double-agent role, and when the SIS went to Beirut to confront him, he fled to Moscow, where he spent the remainder of his life, working for the KGB.

Or did he? When Philby first showed up in Moscow, he was (apparently) suspected by the KGB of being a British plant—a *triple* agent, if you like. Was he, in fact? For years a story circulated in intelligence circles to this effect. The idea was that when SIS "exonerated" Philby in 1951, they found a brilliant way of dealing with their delicate problem of trust:

Congratulations, Kim, old chap! We always thought you were loyal to our cause. And for your next assignment, we would like you to *pretend* to resign from SIS—bitter over our failure to reinstate you fully, don't you see—and move to Beirut and take up a position as a journalist in exile. In due course we intend to give you reason to "flee" to Moscow, where you will eventually be appreciated by your comrades because you can spill a lot of relatively innocuous insider information you already know, and we'll provide you with carefully controlled further gifts of intelligence—and disinformation—that the Russians will be glad to accept, even when they have their doubts. Once you're in their good graces, we'd like you to start telling us everything you can about what they're up to, what questions they ask you, and so forth.

Once SIS had given Philby this new assignment, their worries were over. It just *didn't matter* whether he was truly a British patriot pretending to be a disgruntled agent, or truly a loyal Soviet agent pretending to be a loyal British agent (pretending to be a disgruntled agent...). He would behave in exactly the same ways in either case; his activities would be interpretable and predictable from either of two mirror-image intentional-stance profiles. In one, he deeply believes that the British cause is worth risking his life for, and in the other, he deeply believes that he has a golden opportunity to be a hero of the Soviet Union by pretending that he deeply believes that the British cause is worth risking his life for, and so on. The Soviets, meanwhile, would no doubt draw the same inference

and not bother trying to figure out if Philby was really a double agent or a triple agent or a quadruple agent. Philby, according to this story, had been deftly turned into a sort of human telephone, a mere conduit of information that both sides could exploit for whatever purposes they could dream up, relying on him to be a high-fidelity transmitter of whatever information they gave him, without worrying about where his ultimate loyalties lay.

In 1980, when Philby's standing with his overseers in Moscow was improving (apparently), I was a Visiting Fellow at All Souls College in Oxford, and another Visiting Fellow at the time happened to be Sir Maurice Oldfield, the retired head of MI6, the agency responsible for counterespionage outside Great Britain, and one of the spymasters responsible for Philby's trajectory. (Sir Maurice was the model for Ian Fleming's "M" in the James Bond novels.) One night, after dinner, I asked him whether this story I had heard was true, and he replied quite testily that it was a lot of rubbish. He wished people would just let poor Philby live out his days in Moscow in peace and quiet. I replied that I was pleased to get his answer, but we both had to recognize that it was also what he would have told me had the story been true! Sir Maurice glowered and said nothing.<sup>14</sup>

These two stories illustrate in extreme form the fundamental problem faced by anyone intent on studying religious beliefs. It has been noted by many commentators that typical, canonical religious beliefs cannot be tested for truth. As I suggested earlier, this is as good as a defining characteristic of religious creeds. They have to be "taken on faith" and are not subject to (scientific, historical) confirmation. But, more than that, for this reason and others, religious-belief *expressions* cannot really be taken at face value. The anthropologists Craig Palmer and Lyle Steadman (2004, p. 141) quote the lament of their distinguished predecessor the anthropologist Rodney Needham, who was frustrated in his work with the Penan, in interior Borneo:

I realized that I could not confidently describe their attitude to God, whether this was belief or anything else.... In fact, as I had glumly to conclude, I just did not know what was their psychic attitude toward the personage in whom I had assumed they believed. ... Clearly, it was one thing to report the received ideas to which a people subscribed, but it was quite another matter to say what was their inner state (belief for instance) when they expressed or entertained such ideas. If, however, an ethnographer said that people believed something when he did not actually know what was going on inside them, then surely his account of them must, it occurred to me, be very defective in quite fundamental ways. [Needham, 1972, pp. 1-2]

Palmer and Steadman take this recognition by Needham to signal the need for recasting anthropological theories as accounts of religious behavior, not religious belief: "While religious beliefs are not identifiable, religious behavior is, and this aspect of the human experience can be comprehended. What is needed is an explanation of this observable religious behavior that is restricted to what can be observed" [p. 141]. They go on to say that Needham is virtually alone in realizing the profound implications of this fact about the inscrutability of religious avowal, but they themselves overlook the even more profound implication of it: the natives are in the same boat as Needham! *They* are just as unable to get into the inner minds of their kin and neighbors as Needham is.

When it comes to interpreting religious avowals of others, *everybody is an outsider*. Why? Because religious avowals concern matters that are beyond observation, beyond meaningful test, so the only thing *anybody* can go on is religious behavior, and, more specifically, the behavior of *professing*. A child growing up in a culture is like an anthropologist, after all, surrounded by informants whose professings stand in need of interpretation. The fact that your informants are your father and mother, and speak in your mother