What do Religious Believers Believe?

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A common response to Richard Dawkins' assault on religious belief has been that he is attacking a straw man. The beliefs of religious believers, so the protest goes, are not as crude and simplistic as the ones which he attributes to them. Here is Terry Eagleton's comment to that effect:

> Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the *Book of British Birds*, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology. Card-carrying rationalists like Dawkins…invariably come up with vulgar caricatures of religious faith that would make a first-year theology student wince.[1]

Undeniably, Dawkins does set up an over-simplified picture of religious belief and commitment as the target of his attack. In this paper I shall try to do justice to the various forms which the religious stance takes, both for ordinary believers and for theologians and philosophers of religion. Taking into account the complexities and subtleties, I shall aim to assess the extent to which they remain vulnerable to criticisms in the manner of Dawkins.

Rationalism and Fideism

I use the term 'religion' as a shorthand for 'theistic religion', and I shall concentrate entirely on the case of Christianity, since it is the only religion with which I am adequately familiar. I take the core content of traditional Christian theistic belief to be the assertion of the existence of a *personal* god – a being to whom it makes sense to attribute cognition and will. As Richard Swinburne puts it, 'By a person I mean an individual with basic powers (to act intentionally), purposes and beliefs.'[2] It is also essential to religious belief that the existence of such a being must play some kind of *explanatory* role

[1] Terry Eagleton, 'Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching', *London Review of Books* 19 October 2006.

[2] Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.

doi:10.1017/S1358246111000117 ©The Royal Institute of Philosophy and the contributors 2011

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246111000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in our understanding of reality. The ancient Epicureans acknowledged the existence of gods in the sense of beings who enjoyed an ideal life of unperturbed bliss somewhere in the *intermundia*, but these beings played no role in the workings of the universe and a knowledge of them was held to be irrelevant to an understanding of the world around us; that is what makes Epicureanism a characteristically non-religious philosophy. In contrast, then, a distinctively religious belief in the existence of a god or gods must give such beliefs an explanatory status. Typically, the kind of explanation which is supposed to be provided is *purposive* explanation – hence the requirement of a personal god. Religious explanations claim to explain not just *how* the universe came into existence and continues to operate, but also *why* – understood to mean: with what intentions and for what purposes. That is what makes an explanatory deity more than simply a synonym for the causal workings of nature.

As we shall see, not all religious adherents place explanatory beliefs at the heart of religion, and there is a strong strand in contemporary Christianity which plays down the element of belief altogether. For the time being, however, I want to focus on the version of religious belief which is intended to play this explanatory role. It is this which gives Dawkins his target. Theistic explanations have been rendered redundant, he thinks, by the success of scientific explanations. Hence there is no longer any rational case for the existence of the god posited by theistic explanations. And if religious belief cannot be rationally defended, then it is just blind faith.

This is obviously too quick. As Dawkins knows perfectly well, there are plenty of intelligent religious believers who fully embrace scientific method and scientific explanations; they are not biblical literalists and they have no time for the naivety of creationism. They see theistic explanations not as competing with scientific explanations on the same terrain, but as having a separate role to play at the point where science leaves off. They accept the need to provide rational arguments for why scientific explanations are insufficient, and why theistic explanation is also necessary. Those rational arguments have to be taken seriously.

I have said that, according to this account, theistic explanation has a different role from scientific explanation. But the view of what that role is will necessarily be shaped by a view of the nature of scientific explanation and its limits. So although the theistic explanation is not seen as a scientific explanation, it is what we might call *parascientific* explanation. Its scope is set by claims about where scientific explanations properly leave off and how they are supposed to dovetail with explanations of a non-scientific kind. A classic example of such a parascientific explanation now much in favour is the so-called

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'fine tuning' argument. According to this argument, if the fundamental scientific laws and the basic physical constants had been even slightly different from what they are, the 'big bang' would not have led to a universe like ours, with its galaxies and stars and planets, on at least one of which there are living beings, including conscious beings such as ourselves. Some further explanation is therefore needed, and it cannot be a scientific explanation, since scientific explanations must appeal to precisely those basic laws and constants which stand in need of further explanation. The best explanation, it is then suggested, is a purposive explanation – that those basic laws and constants were fixed by an intelligent deity who *knew* that they would generate our universe and who *intended* that they should do so.[3]

What makes the 'fine tuning' argument a good argument, it is said, is that it provides the *simplest* explanation of why the initial conditions were such as to lead to our universe and the existence of beings such as ourselves. Dawkins has responded that this is to misunderstand the requirement of simplicity in explanations. The theistic hypothesis may be simply stated, but the existence and agency of such a being stands much more in need of explanation than what it is supposed to explain.[4]

On this point Dawkins seems to me to be right. Indeed, I think that the problems go even deeper than he supposes. He sees the problem for the fine-tuning argument as essentially an infinite regress problem: 'A designer God cannot be used to explain organised complexity because any God capable of designing anything would have to be complex enough to demand the same kind of explanation in its own right' (109). And he assumes, I think, that any possible candidate for an explanation of the existence of an intelligent designer would itself have to be a scientific explanation akin to the evolutionary explanation of the existence of intelligent life on our planet. I would myself want to add that the supposed theistic explanation of the initial conditions of the universe also faces insuperable metaphysical difficulties. It would itself require further explanations of, for instance:

- how such a being could know what scientific laws and physical constants would produce a universe such as ours;

[3] Some examples of this line of argument are: Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), and *Is There a God?*; John Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), *Science and Theology* (London: SPCK, 1998), and many other works; Keith Ward, *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2008).

[4] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), 134ff, esp. 109 and 148–150.

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- how such a being could create, *ex nihilo*, matter having those properties;
- how this intelligent being could exist without any physical embodiment;
- how a non-physical being could act on matter.

An explanation which genuinely met the requirement of simplicity would be economical in the sense of explaining as much as possible without invoking processes or mechanisms which are themselves more inexplicable than the original phenomena to be explained. The 'fine tuning' argument fails to meet that requirement. I accept that it is, in one sense, not in competition with scientific explanations, and as such can claim to provide a basis for religious belief which is not 'refuted' by scientific theory. But it is in competition with scientific explanations in this sense: that it must satisfy the same standards for what can count as a good explanation, including standards of simplicity and economy. It fails to do so.

Here is a second popular proposal for the kind of non-scientific explanation which theistic belief is supposed to provide. God, it is said, is the explanation of 'why there is something rather than nothing'. The problem is that it is very difficult to see how anything could constitute such an explanation. Theism does not do so. It purports to explain one thing (the natural universe) by reference to the existence of another 'thing' (God). Any explanation, scientific or otherwise, is bound to take that form: the explanandum is explained by reference to the explanans, so something has to be taken as given in order to provide the basis for the explanation.

At this point it is sometimes objected that theistic explanation does not take that form, because 'God is not an entity alongside other entities'. Here is Eagleton's review of Dawkins again:

> Nor is he [i.e. God] a principle, an entity, or 'existent': in one sense of that word it would be perfectly coherent for religious types to claim that God does not in fact exist. He is, rather, the condition of possibility of any entity whatsoever, including ourselves. He is the answer to why there is something rather than nothing. God and the universe do not add up to two, any more than my envy and my left foot constitute a pair of objects.[5]

I am not sure what is meant by saying that God is not an 'entity'. Clearly he is not an individual of the same kind as any other individuals – not located in space and time, and therefore not individuated in

[5] Eagleton, 'Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching'.

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the manner of other things or persons. But if he is not in *some* sense an existent entity, then it is difficult to see how he can constitute an explanation for, or a 'condition of the possibility of', anything.

It may indeed be that the question 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' is not really a request for an explanation at all. Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, famously says 'Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is.'[6] That is precisely *not* a call for an explanation. It is, perhaps, a way of expressing the feeling of wonder at the thought that there might have been nothing at all. That thought can induce a sense of metaphysical vertigo, and perhaps this is why we might reach for the word 'mystical'. But it is not a thought which appropriately invites the response 'The reason why there is something rather than nothing is that God willed it to be so.' That response would still leave things mysterious, but it would banish the sense of the mystical – the sense that nothing could possibly count as an answer to the question. Posing the question does not, therefore, provide a space for theistic belief.

I have looked very briefly at two possible ways of claiming that the success of scientific explanations leaves room for a different, non-scientific explanation, of a kind which belief in a personal deity can provide, and that the need for such an explanation therefore furnishes a rational basis for religious belief. A great deal more could be said in defence of such claims, and of others like them, but they are all likely to fail for the same reasons. Either they will purport to explain when explanations are not what is needed, or they will fail to meet the requirements of a good explanation. Explanations do not have to be scientific explanations, but they do have to match up to the same standards for what is to count as a good explanation – at the very least, they should not leave things even more inexplicable.[7]

The fact remains, nevertheless, that many theists do try to meet the challenge of the success of science by producing rational arguments of this kind. And the efforts of theistic rationalists such as Swinburne, Polkinghorne, Ward and others are more sophisticated versions of

[6] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), 6.44.

[7] I do not have space to discuss here other possible ways of providing a rational basis for belief in the existence of a personal deity, such as appeals to religious experience of the kind defended by Ward, (*Why There Almost Certainly is a God*, ch. 7). I say something about appeals to religious experience, and why I think they fail, in my *On Humanism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 41–2, and in 'The Varieties of Non-Religious Experience', in John Cottingham (ed.), *The Meaning of Theism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

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the vague intuition entertained by many religious believers, that God is needed to explain things which science cannot explain. That is why Dawkins' sweeping accusations of irrationalism are far too dismissive. He says:

> Christianity, just as much as Islam, teaches children that unquestioned faith is a virtue. You don't have to make the case for what you believe.[8]

Attempts at rational justification may fail, but unsuccessful arguments are still appeals to rational argument, not simply to 'unquestioned faith'. Dawkins implicitly acknowledges this when he engages with the arguments and attempts to show that they are insufficiently cogent. Rather than accusing all religious believers of irrationalism and a recourse to 'unquestioned faith', his criticism would be better put in the form of a dilemma. *Either*

> (a) religious believers attempt to provide rational arguments for their belief, in which case their arguments, though not refuted by science, fail to meet the standards for a good explanation,

or

> (b) they eschew the appeal to rational argument and assert that religious commitment rests ultimately on non-rational faith.

Though Dawkins is too sweeping, it has to be acknowledged that there is indeed a strong fideist and irrationalist strand both in modern theology and in popular religion. Karl Barth for instance, often held up as the most important theologian of the twentieth century, maintained that since God is 'wholly other', we cannot aspire to knowledge of him by means of our merely human powers of reason. Natural theology he saw as a blind alley. For Barth, we can know God only insofar as he chooses to reveal himself to us, and this he has done above all through Jesus of Nazareth.

Any such appeal to revelation as the basis of religious belief is bound to be fideistic. Since there can be no self-authenticating revelation, the claim that any supposed revelation is an authentic revelation of the true god has inescapably to be an act of faith. For all their sophistication, such theologians cannot avoid the circularity which is happily embraced by so many ordinary religious believers: 'I believe in God because his existence and nature is revealed in our holy book, and I know that what is in that book is true, because it is the word of God.'

[8] Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 306.

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When I refer to a strand of theology and religious discourse as 'fideist' and 'irrationalist', I do not mean that it is devoid of intellectual content. It can go along with an abundance of scholarship devoted to Biblical exegesis, textual criticism, historical enquiry, and the articulation and defence of the finer points of doctrine. What makes it irrationalist is the refusal of the need for rational justification of the core beliefs which underpin the whole edifice. This tendency is still alive and well, and can take highly intellectualised forms. Here, for instance, is a representative of the current theology which calls itself 'radical orthodoxy', drawing on postmodernist clichés about the plurality of 'narratives', the failure of any overarching meta-narrative, and hence the supposed dispensability of any notion of objective truth.

> 1. The end of modernity, which is not accomplished, yet continues to arrive, means the end of a single system of truth based on universal reason, which tells us what reality is like.
> 2. With this ending, there ends also the modern predicament of theology. It no longer has to measure up to accepted secular standards of scientific truth or normative rationality…
> 3. In postmodernity there are infinitely many possible versions of truth, inseparable from particular narratives. Objects and subjects are, as they are narrated in a story. Outside a plot, which has its own unique, unfounded reasons, one cannot conceive how objects and subjects would be, nor even that they would be at all.[9]

How convenient. At a stroke it becomes possible to ignore rational criticism and to brush aside any demand for the rational defence of religious belief. When Dawkins describes Christianity as teaching that 'unquestioned faith is a virtue' and that 'you don't have to make the case for what you believe', he is over-generalising, but he does have legitimate targets.

Sideways Moves

So far I have been talking about religious *belief*. I have treated religious commitment as a matter of accepting certain beliefs, and

[9] John Milbank, 'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short *Summa* in Forty-two Responses to Unasked Questions', in Graham Ward (ed.), *The Postmodern God: a Theological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 265.

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I have argued that the rationalist and the fideist accounts of such beliefs, though they should not be lumped together, each remain in their different ways vulnerable to Dawkins-style objections. I need now to consider an increasingly common suggestion from contemporary religious adherents – that religion is not primarily constituted by 'beliefs' in the sense of factual or propositional beliefs. John Cornwell, in his riposte to Dawkins, says:

> You think religion is "a persistent false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence". I am sure you realise that this hardly exhausts the meaning for most people, still less those who study it academically – theologians, philosophers, historians, and anthropologists. Religion, of course, is only partly involved in actual beliefs or doctrines, and these beliefs, if truly religious, are rarely held (except by fundamentalists) to be literal explanations of the world… Religion's activities, its rituals, its mythologies, hymns, meditations, prayers, chants, poetry, images, parables, legends, taboos, and sacramentals (by which I mean holy objects, such as candles, incense, oils, vestments, holy water) are principally symbolic, often appealing to deep levels of folk memory.[10]

Clearly, if religion does not involve a commitment to the holding of factual beliefs, it stands a much greater chance of being immune to the kinds of objection which Dawkins levels at it, that we should obtain our factual beliefs from the sciences and that this leaves no space to be filled by religious beliefs. But as we shall see, it makes an important difference whether Cornwell and others want to say that religion is 'only partly' a matter of beliefs, or whether it is *not at all* a matter of beliefs. I shall look at three possible sideways moves which can be made by religious adherents, all of them hinted at in the quotation from Cornwell – three deflationary accounts of religious commitment which play down the element of belief. They are understandings of religion in terms of (a) practices, (b) metaphors, and (c) stories or myths.

1. Religion as practices

It is obvious that practices of the kind listed by Cornwell – prayers, hymns, rituals and so forth – have been central to the character of

[10] John Cornwell, *Darwin's Angel* (London: Profile Books, 2007), 43–44.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246111000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

all major religions, including Christianity. What is less obvious is whether it can plausibly be claimed that these, rather than beliefs, are the centrally defining features of religion. One such attempt is the work of the theologian George Lindbeck. In his book *The Nature of Doctrine* he proposes what he calls a 'cultural-linguistic model' of Christian doctrine, which he contrasts with a cognitivist propositional model (as well as with an 'experiential-expressive' model).[11] Like many other recent theorists of religion, he draws on Wittgenstein's concept of 'language-games' to argue that, though avowals of belief are inescapably present as elements of doctrine, they get their sense from the religious practices and rituals in which they are embedded.

Any such account as Lindbeck's will find it hard to deny that assertions of belief are either explicit, as in the reciting of creeds, or implicit, as in the addressing of prayers and praises, in religious practices. That being so, it seems to me that some form of cognitivism is bound to re-emerge. Accordingly, Lindbeck's account falls back into seeing the practices as a *guide* to propositional beliefs rather than an *alternative* to them. He says, for instance, that religious sentences

> acquire enough referential specificity to have first-order or ontological truth or falsity only in determinate settings… The theological and doctrinal uses of, e.g. "Christ is Lord" are important… but they are not propositional. For Christian theological purposes, that sentence becomes a first-order proposition capable… of making ontological truth claims only as it is used in the activities of adoration, proclamation, obedience, promise-hearing, and promise-keeping which shape individuals and communities into conformity to the mind of Christ.[12]

This passage revealingly oscillates between suggesting that 'Christ is Lord' is not a propositional claim at all, and suggesting that it *becomes* a propositional truth claim when it is used in religious activities. That tension is surely inevitable. It is difficult to see how religious practitioners can meaningful engage in prayer without believing that there exists a being to whom such prayers can appropriately be addressed, or can engage in the activities of praise and worship without believing that there is a being who is the proper object of such praise and worship. And this is typical of the way propositional claims are bound to re-emerge in 'practice' conceptions of religion.

[11] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984).
[12] Ibid., 68.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246111000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

It is not surprising, therefore, that Lindbeck often shifts to employing the notion of language-games in ways which make the contrast with propositional truth-claims less stark. Sometimes he speaks of religious language games as categorial frameworks. And since he then has to acknowledge that different religions appear to offer different and incommensurable categorial frameworks, thus raising the spectre of relativism, we find him re-introducing the idea that one particular set of categories may be more 'adequate to reality'.

> Thus the questions raised in comparing religions have to do first of all with the adequacy of their categories. Adequate categories are those which can be made to apply to what is taken to be real… A religion thought of as comparable to a cultural system, as a set of language games correlated with a form of life, may as a whole correspond or not correspond to what a theist calls God's being and will.[13]

Talk of 'categorial adequacy' slips imperceptibly into talk of 'categorial truth' (e.g. on page 51), and though he continues to contrast this with 'propositional truth', the commitment to truth-claims has inescapably re-emerged.

Sometimes, again, he rephrases his contrast as one between doctrines understood as propositional truths and doctrines understood as 'rules' or 'regulative principles'. Once more, however, the contrast is set up only to collapse.

> It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine the historical evidence for a regulative rather than propositional interpretation of the ancient creeds, but… three regulative principles at least were obviously at work. First, there is the monotheistic principle: there is only one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus. Second, there is the principle of historical specificity: the stories of Jesus refer to a genuine human being who was born, lived, and died in a particular time and place. Third, there is the principle of what may be infelicitously called Christological maximalism: every possible importance is to be ascribed to Jesus that is not inconsistent with the first rules.[14]

The first two of these 'regulative principles', and perhaps even the third, look remarkably like propositional beliefs. And that, I have suggested, is bound to happen. The practices make no sense

[13] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 48, 51.
[14] Ibid., 94.

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without beliefs. We are then back with the question of whether the beliefs can be rationally supported, and whether their possible explanatory role has been usurped by the success of scientific explanations. We have still to consider, however, the other deflationary accounts of religion, and it may be that the apparent propositional claims and beliefs can be re-interpreted as 'mythological' or 'metaphorical'. We shall see.

2. Religion as metaphors

Here is Cornwell, addressing Dawkins, again:

> When theologians attempt to describe God's reality … they are all too well aware of the trap known as anthropomorphism: of treating God as a human creature, Yet it seems pointless to remind you that thousands of studies have been published on this theme down the centuries emphasising … the impossibility of speaking about him in anything but inadequate terms. Those inadequate terms are broadly speaking metaphorical and analogical.[15]

It is indeed important to do justice to believers' insistence that the nature of God surpasses human understanding, and that humans have to grope for the right language, which will always elude them. The question is then *how much* of religious language and beliefs can be construed as metaphorical, and whether it can plausibly *all* be said to be metaphorical (or analogical or symbolic), as Cornwell might seem to imply.

There are obvious candidates for a metaphorical interpretation. Talk of 'God the Father' is clearly to be construed as a metaphor. God cannot sensibly be thought to stand in a biological relationship either to Jesus, his 'son', or to those human beings who address him as 'our Father'. The metaphor is intended to capture, perhaps, a certain combination of moral authority, creative power, and loving care. And once 'father' is construed as a metaphor, there is room for feminist theologians to suggest that the metaphor of motherhood also has a role to play, perhaps as capturing better than 'father' the qualities of nurturing and compassionate devotion.

There is a tendency to run together the metaphorical, the analogical, and the symbolic as features of religious language, and it is indeed not always easy to tell which term is the most appropriate, but we can

[15] Cornwell, *Darwin's Angel*, 48.

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see how any of these labels has the potential to secure intellectual respectability for religious beliefs. The six-day creation story at the beginning of *Genesis* can be read as a metaphorical or symbolic representation of the process of creation by divine power and intelligence over billions of years. The miracle stories can be read as metaphors for the healing power of compassion. The resurrection of Jesus can be seen as a metaphor for the triumph of goodness over apparent defeat and death. In all such cases, the invoking of metaphor serves to rebut the charge that these beliefs lack credibility in the light of a scientific world-view.

I want to insist, however, that religious language cannot be *entirely* metaphorical (or analogical or symbolic). If it were, then there would be no grounds for identifying it as distinctively religious in the first place. It must be possible to say at least something in non-metaphorical terms about what the metaphors apply to and why they are appropriate. Take again the example of 'God the Father', and the suggestion that this points to the combination of God's power and authority and love. It is possible to defend the metaphor as appropriate only if it can plausibly be maintained that there *is* a being whose relationship to the natural world and to human beings invites such a description. Discussion about whether 'father' or 'mother' or some combination of the two is the more appropriate metaphorical description presupposes that we can appeal to experiences of a non-human power and love at work in the world, and can test the metaphors against that experience. And it is difficult to see how such a discussion could even get off the ground without the acceptance of what I identified earlier as the core element of traditional Christian belief: the existence of a personal god possessing powers of cognition and will. Talk of metaphor therefore cannot obviate the need to make a case for the non-metaphorical truth of that belief.

Consider this passage from Lucretius:

> Mother of Aeneas and his race, delight of men and gods, life-giving Venus, it is your doing that under the wheeling constellations of the sky all nature teems with life, both the sea that buoys up our ships and the earth that yields our food. Through you all living creatures are conceived and come forth to look upon the sunlight.[16]

[16] Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Book I, lines 1–5, in the translation by R. E. Latham, *The Nature of the Universe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1951).

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The invocation of Venus is for Lucretius a metaphorical description of nature and the procreative power of sexual desire. We know, from everything else in the poem, that he rejects the idea of divine beings playing any directive role in the workings of nature. That is what makes his world-view an uncompromisingly non-religious one. What is it, then, that distinguishes the Christian metaphor of 'God the Father' from Lucretius' metaphor of Venus as the mother of all living things? It can only be the non-metaphorical belief that there does exist a personal being separate from the natural world, with creative and benevolent intentions and purposes.

Janet Soskice, in her thorough and rigorous discussion of metaphor and its place in religious language, argues that in an important sense metaphors are irreducible.

> No metaphor is completely reducible to a literal equivalent without consequent loss of content, not even those metaphors for which one can specify an ostensive reference. When we speak of the camel as "the ship of the desert", the relational irreducibility of the metaphor lies in the potentially limitless suggestions that are evoked by considering the camel on the model of a ship: the implied corollaries of a swaying motion, a heavy and precious cargo, a broad wilderness, a route mapped by stars, distant ports of call, and so on.[17]

Soskice's example demonstrates one sense in which metaphors can be said to be 'irreducible' – in respect of their scope and suggestiveness. But this does not make them irreducible in the sense of having *no* literal equivalents. It does not invalidate my claim that we still have to employ at least some literal equivalent of any metaphor in order to identify what makes it appropriate. This is precisely what Soskice herself does with her example of the camel as 'the ship of the desert'. She provides literal equivalents – the swaying motion, the precious cargo, and so on – which show very effectively why the metaphor is appropriate. Agreed, they do not exhaust the suggestiveness of the metaphor, but if we were unable to say at least some things like this in literal terms, we would be incapable of seeing what makes the metaphor a good one. The same goes for the use of metaphor in religious language. Religious beliefs cannot be *entirely* metaphorical. They must include some non-metaphorical truth claims. And those truth claims need to be rationally justifiable.

[17] Janet Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 95.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246111000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. Religion as stories ('myths')

Cornwell to Dawkins again:

> …your separation of fact and fiction, true and false, reality and imagination, science and everything else, could not be more plain…. The Gospels are not factual (because they have all those factual inconsistencies, as you note), therefore the Gospels are fiction. So are you inviting your readers to infer that poets, dramatists, novelists are not concerned with truth-telling either? It's one thing, I suppose, to suggest that Christ's Sermon on the Mount contains no truths, but do you really wish your readers to accept that writers such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens, Dostoevsky … the entire canon of world literature … is just so much *untruth*? Fiction?[18]

The view of religious doctrines as stories is perhaps the most popular of the sideways moves which I am considering. It is sometimes formulated in terms of 'myths' rather than 'stories'. I won't dwell on possible differences of emphasis between the two terms. I take myths to be stories which are hallowed by tradition. That may be too simple, but the important question raised by both terms is whether religious doctrines should be seen as having the kind of significance and the kind of truth ascribed to imaginative creations such as plays, poems, novels and fables, and whether that is a better model than the model of scientific truth and can avoid the implication that scientific theories and religious doctrines are competing on the same ground.

As with metaphors, we need to ask: how extensive is the assimilation of religious beliefs to stories supposed to be? That stories feature prominently in religions in general and Christianity in particular is undeniable. The parables told by Jesus in the Gospels are clear examples. The beginning of *Genesis* can easily be read as a 'creation myth' comparable to the creation myths of other cultures and not in competition with scientific hypotheses. The narratives in the Old Testament need not be assessed for historical accuracy. The Garden of Eden and the Fall, Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, Abraham and Isaac, Joseph and his brothers, Moses and the exodus from Egypt: these are stories – wonderful stories – which encapsulate valuable insights into human experience. Are the Gospel narratives to be read in the same way, as Cornwell seems to suggest? All of them?

[18] Cornwell, *Darwin's Angel*, 34–5.

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And is even the overarching narrative of a divine creator and his purposes for mankind to be treated as an imaginative fiction?

An early and influential comprehensive version of the 'religion as stories' thesis was Richard Braithwaite's paper 'An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief', published in 1955. The first part of the paper defends the common view that the important feature of religions is their moral content: 'My contention… is that the primary use of religious assertions is to announce allegiance to a set of moral principles…'[19] A problem for this position, he then recognises, is that different religions may well be expressions of the same moral values.

> How then can religious assertions be distinguished into those which are Christian, those which are Jewish, those which are Buddhist, by the policies of life which they respectively recommend if, on examination, these policies turn out to be the same?[20]

It is in order to deal with this objection that he introduces the emphasis on stories.

> The really important difference, I think, is to be found in the fact that the intentions to pursue the behaviour policies, which may be the same for different religions, are associated with the thinking of different *stories* (or sets of stories)… It will be the fact that the intention to follow this way of life is associated in the mind of a Christian with one set of stories (the Christian stories) while it is associated in the mind of a Buddhist with thinking of another set of stories (the Buddhist stories) which enables a Christian assertion to be distinguished from a Buddhist one.[21]

Braithwaite's formulation of the connection between stories and ways of life is somewhat crude: they are 'associated in the mind'. Since the publication of Braithwaite's paper, much philosophical work has been done on how imaginative narratives can embody truths, including moral truths, which illuminate the human condition and help us to understand our lives. The view of religions as stories can draw on this work, and religious stories can then take their place among the stories which play this role.

[19] Richard Braithwaite, 'An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief', in Basil Mitchell (ed.), *The Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 82.
[20] Ibid., 84.
[21] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246111000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

But the question then arises: why should religious stories have a special status in this respect? Stories can be valuable, but not just any stories will do. Some stories (religious and non-religious) are powerful and illuminating and inspiring, some (such as much popular fiction, not to mention the stories conveyed through other media such as films and television) are trite, sentimental, sexist, and sadistic. We have to assess and select, and it seems highly implausible to suppose that the upshot of our assessment will be to buy into a package deal consisting of all and only those stories linked to a particular religion. As Cornwell himself says, we have Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens and Dostoevsky. He and other Christians may set the Christian stories on a par with the classics of the literary tradition, but why should they be given a unique status? They could be given such a status if it could be backed up by claims about an authoritative divine revelation which guarantees that these particular stories are divinely inspired – but that would take us back to the contestable factual truth-claims which the emphasis on stories was intended to avoid.

A possible response might be that the Christian stories have been transmitted over generations and have stood the test of time as sources of inspiration. That might be why some defenders of religion as a set of stories might prefer to use the term 'myths' and might suggest that it is these that have a special power to meet our needs. Again, however, that is not a sufficient reason for focusing exclusively on the stories of one particular religious tradition such as Christianity. What about the power of the ancient Greek myths – Pandora's box, Prometheus and the gift of fire, Daedalus and Icarus, the Rape of Persephone, and so many others. These seem to me to embody deep truths about despair and hope, about human resilience and the defiance of adversity, about the dangers of overweening confidence in technical contrivances, about the natural rhythms of death and rebirth. That does not commit me to an allegiance to ancient Greek religion – it doesn't make me an Olympianist.

But the Christian stories are *our* stories, it might be said. They have a special status because they are the legacy of our own cultural tradition – they are central to our cultural identity and that is why they are the ones which we live by. Perhaps – but only on a limited view of 'our culture'. The myths of Greece and Roman occupy almost as important a place in the culture as do the Christian stories, and both of them are parts of a wider cultural tradition which is replete with stories of all kinds.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246111000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Religion of Identity

The emphasis on *identity* does, however, take us to the heart of the problem posed by my title. For most religious 'believers', I suggest, religion is primarily a matter of identity rather than belief. Historically that has always been the case. People have adhered to a religion because it has been the shared framework of understanding and devotion inherited unquestioningly from the society in which they have been born and raised, not because of any independent assessment that its beliefs are true. The idea that one might choose one's religion is a very late arrival. In contemporary multicultural societies adherence to a particular religion is often the badge of identity of a sub-culture; many people see themselves as Muslims or Hindus because their roots are in the relevant immigrant community. Christians, whether committed or nominal, see themselves as such because Christianity is the tradition with which they identify. And many thinking Christians, confronted with the difficulty of providing a cogent intellectual justification for traditional Christian beliefs, will, if they are honest, acknowledge that their religion is a matter of who they are rather than what they believe.

An essay by Nicholas Lash, in response to Dawkins, makes this point very explicitly. Dawkins, he says, 'takes it for granted that to "believe in God" is to be of the opinion that God exists.'[22] This preoccupation with beliefs in the sense of opinions represents a complete misunderstanding of religion:

> To be a Jew, or a Christian, or a Muslim, is to be a member of a particular *people*: a people whose identity is specified by particular habits of memory and ritual, of understanding and relationship and hope.[23]

We can see from this quotation how an emphasis on identity and community membership goes naturally with an emphasis on practices rather than beliefs. And since the beliefs nevertheless remain an ineradicable part of the picture, Lash also employs the characteristic recourse to the emphasis on metaphors and stories. He puts to Dawkins the following question:

> …given the *centrality* of this insistence, in Christian thought, for two millennia, on the near-impossibility of speaking

[22] Nicholas Lash, 'Where Does *The God Delusion* Come From?', in *Theology for Pilgrims* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008), 7.
[23] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246111000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> appropriately of God, is it ignorance or sheer perversity that leads him wholly to ignore it, and to treat all statements about God as if they were characteristically taken, by their users, as straightforward and literal description? …most Christians are not fundamentalists. They know that they do not comprehend the mystery of God, and that what we say is said in metaphor and parable.[24]

I take Lash's essay to be a particularly clear and articulate statement of the position adopted at least implicitly by many, often the most sensitive and thoughtful, of his fellow-Christians. Their Christianity consists not in a set of intellectual beliefs about the origin and nature of the universe, but in membership of a community with which they share a way of life and particular practices, rituals and observances. And if challenged on the traditional beliefs of Christianity, they are likely to fall back on the construal of these as metaphors and stories rather than as literal factual truth-claims. A position such as this then incorporates all three of the sideways moves which I have been discussing – the emphases on practices, metaphors, and stories – because it sees these as defining features of a particular community, membership of which makes one a Christian.

What are we to make of this? I offer, first, two brief practical comments. On the one hand, a religious commitment of this kind stands a good chance of being, in one way, benign in its practical consequences. It stands in contrast to a religion of dogmatism and textual fundamentalism. Christians of this ilk are least likely, in particular, to suppose that their moral views can be derived from a literal reading of particular Biblical texts. They can be flexible and liberal in their interpretation of the traditional teachings. They need not find themselves trapped by Biblical pronouncements on, for instance, sexual behaviour, homosexuality, or gender relations. (Whether they are nevertheless trapped in the authoritative pronouncements of ecclesiastical leaders and institutions will depend on which church they belong to.)

My second practical comment is more negative. I recognise the appeal of religion as communal identity, but I am not convinced that it is what we need now. We know all too well the possible consequences – the lethal consequences – of a religion of identity. I am not suggesting that Christians who feel an attachment to the rituals of choral evensong, or Jews or Muslims or Hindus who value their cultural roots, are indistinguishable from latter-day crusaders and

[24] Ibid., 8–9.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246111000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

jihadists. Nevertheless, in a diverse society facing dangers of fragmentation and internal conflict, we should be looking for the cultural ties which bring people together rather than the religions which divide them.

But what about the intellectual status of the religion of identity? By putting the weight on community membership, and by downplaying the role of beliefs, understood as factual truth-claims, in favour of practices and metaphor and stories, can it avoid a conflict with scientific understanding in which it would face defeat, and can it thereby secure immunity from rational criticism?

Let me first recall my critical comments so far. An emphasis on practices, I suggested, faces the problem that the practices appear to presuppose beliefs. Prayer makes no sense without a personal deity to whom the prayers are addressed. Praise and worship make no sense without a being who is the object of adoration. Intercession for forgiveness makes no sense in the absence of a god who knows and forgives. The traditional beliefs which underpin the practices may then be construed in terms of metaphors and stories. But if they consist *entirely* of metaphors and stories, there is nothing to make them distinctively religious. They are metaphors and stories which any atheist can embrace as part of a common cultural stock. You don't have to be a Christian to see praise of the Creator as an expression of awe and wonder at the beauty of the natural world, or to respond to the stories of the nativity and the crucifixion which pervade literature and music and the visual arts, alongside many other stories.

This was where the appeal to community identity came in. Giving a special status to these particular practices and metaphors and stories can be seen as a token of membership. What makes them distinctively religious is that they are the distinguishing marks of a particular religious community.

Is that a coherent and watertight position? I do not think that it is, straightforwardly, intellectually refutable. I do think that it is inherently *unstable*.

I have posed the question: do those Christians who put so much weight on metaphors and stories understand what appear to be the 'beliefs' of their religion as consisting *exclusively* of metaphors and stories? My impression is that, typically, they simply do not press that question. To put it rather brutally: they do not explicitly accept that they have *no* non-metaphorical religious beliefs of a traditional kind, but if they are challenged on the plausibility of any *particular* belief they are always able to fall back on the reinterpretation of it as a metaphor or a parable or a myth.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246111000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

If they were to press the question, they would face a dilemma. Jettisoning *all* the traditional non-metaphorical beliefs would loosen the bonds which unite the religious community. Because the metaphors and stories are so much a part of the wider culture, the boundaries which separate the religious community from that wider culture would become increasingly porous, to the point of eventually disappearing.

Conversely, if the metaphors and stories are to have a special status as the possessions of a distinctive community to which the secular humanist does not belong, they must be tied to at least *some* non-metaphorical factual beliefs. If talk of 'God the Father Almighty' as 'maker of heaven and earth' is to be more than a metaphorical way of talking about the creative power of natural processes, then it must point to some inescapably metaphysical belief, however vague, about the existence of a creator distinct from the natural world and in some sense personal. If the Gospel narratives are to be seen as more than stories which must take their place alongside other tales of inspiring teachers and moral visionaries and martyrs for a cause, then there must be a commitment to at least some factual claims about the life of Jesus, his survival of physical death, and his special relationship to the creative intelligence which is called 'God'. Those metaphysical beliefs and those factual beliefs then have to be capable of rational justification, and of being defended against criticism from a scientific standpoint.

I do not think that they can be. And on this point at least, I think that Dawkins is right.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246111000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press