Can Theism be Defeated?

For all of the reasons we have been discussing, god-bearing individuals usually find it extremely difficult to contest their religious credulity and conformity biases. This applies not only to laypeople, but to scholars who are affiliated with religious in-groups as well. Philosophy can help. It is no coincidence that the majority of professional philosophers embrace (or lean toward) atheism. Unfortunately, the road most travelled by unbelieving philosophers and scientists with a predilection for engaging the intellectual elite of culturally dominant monotheistic coalitions is marked by deep ruts carved out by centuries of debate over the same tired arguments for and against the probability (or possibility) of the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent God.

Occasionally one encounters theistic dialogue partners who are willing to budge a bit on issues like divine predestination or foreknowledge. When pressed on the coherence or plausibility of the very idea of a mysterious intentional force whose thoughts and desires (and even presence) can only be detected by in-group members ritually engaged in religious sects, however, progressive defenders of the faith make the same sort of predictable evasive hermeneutical maneuvers as their more traditionalist colleagues. How can we escape this disputatious cul-de-sac within which apologists and (too many) atheists have been circling for so long?

Instead of focusing primarily on the logical incoherence and empirical intractability of religious faith, which to many non-believers seem so obvious, I suggest we pay more attention to the way in which ritual interaction with imagined supernatural forces is engendered by an aggregate of evolved biases, to which many believers seem so oblivious. If we stay only at the level of explicit claims about gods (or God) we do not notice the implicit motivational reasoning that immunizes faith from critique and so easily activates believers’ defensive reactions to (and even perceptions of) challenges to their supernatural beliefs and behaviors.

The apparent futility, monotony, and interminability of theoretical debates with religious apologists might lead us to conclude that an atheist’s energy would be better spent identifying and implementing practical solutions to concrete problems. I’m all for the latter. However, one good reason for

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1 See, e.g., the discussion of policy-oriented computer modeling and simulation methodologies at the end of Chapter 12.
staying engaged in a debate over the metaphysical implications of scientific discoveries about the mechanisms of religious reproduction is that the arguments of apologetic philosophers of religion and other religiously affiliated scholars can play an important role in reinforcing the attitudes and actions of religious laypeople, who are all too often resistant to any pragmatic solution that is forbidden (or not authorized) by the supernatural agents whom they think are watching over them.

On the one hand, many believers spend an inordinate amount of time imaginatively engaging secretive and punitive supernatural agents who supposedly have designs for redeeming those who are part of their religious alliance. On the other hand, they all too quickly become belligerent when confronted with the religious beliefs and behaviors of those allied with other supernatural coalitions, which they find rather decidedly bizarre. Atheists are often astonished that theists fail to notice this double standard. Perhaps even more surprising is the apparent lack of concern expressed by believers even after this partisan bias is pointed out. At least religious apologists are concerned enough to be defensive about it! As students of the history of philosophy and theology, they realize that the rise of scientific naturalism and the spread of pluralistic secularism present new and serious challenges to the credibility and cohesion of their religious coalitions.

Insofar as apologetic arguments provide cover for the flourishing of theistic credulity and conformity biases, thereby exacerbating the global tensions we all face, it is worthwhile to take the time (and space) to challenge them. Debunking the theological claims of their religious colleagues is one way that godless philosophers can promote an adaptive atheism. In this chapter, I briefly describe three steps that may help us break the bad habits that have for so long characterized discourse about the extent to which science, and especially the science of religion, debunks theism. These steps are woven into a conversation with a recent book by Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt titled A Natural History of Natural Theology: The Cognitive Science of Religion and Philosophy of Religion.²

De Cruz and De Smedt have clearly demonstrated the extent to which – and the way in which – evolved cognitive tendencies play a role in the emergence of theistic ideas about God and in the formulation of theistic arguments meant to defend belief in his existence. Their contributions to the “naturalization”

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² De Cruz and De Smedt (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014). Unless otherwise noted, page numbers throughout this chapter refer to this book. An earlier version of this essay was originally published as a commentary on their book; see Shults, “Can Theism Be Defeated? CSR and the Debunking of Supernatural Agent Abductions,” Religion, Brain & Behavior 6, no. 4 (2015).