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Introduction

Let me roll out the red carpet for readers of this interdisciplinary book on religion, ethics, and evolution by telling an anecdote about a theological experience I once had. The story raises some of the main issues to be investigated in the following pages. Thereafter, the contents of the book are indicated, and I say a few words on its composition, title, and intended readership.

In the year 2000, I was one of the few non-Indian speakers at the Platinum Jubilee Celebrations-Conference of the Indian Philosophical Congress, held in New Delhi at the end of December. Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore and the later president of India Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan established the congress in 1925 to enhance Indian philosophical self-confidence and intellectual independence. During the conference, prominent Indian philosophers or 'delegates' delivered lengthy lectures. Many of them were traditionally dressed Brahmans, or Brahman descendants. There was time reserved for discussions between individual participants after lunches and dinners, which were prepared on wood fires in the open air.

During one of these meetings, I chatted with a believing Hindu and expert on Tantric traditions, who tried to enlighten me about the complex personalities of Shiva and Kundalini Shakti. After a while, I could not help asking: 'But how many gods *are* there according to you?' He burst out laughing, and replied: 'At least fifty thousand!' Later I learned that according to popular versions of Tantra Hinduism, there are 33 *crore* deities, that is, 330 million gods.

In order to test or tease my interlocutor a little, I spelled out the well-known arguments from simplicity and parsimony of Jewish, Christian,

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and Muslim philosophers of religion to the effect that the truth of monotheism is more probable than that of any polytheism. My Tantra companion was unimpressed. 'Surely', he said, 'most philosophers and scientists agree that simplicity is not an indicator of truth, but at best a pragmatic intellectual virtue of theories. Reality may be very complex indeed!' He went on explaining to me that Indian religious traditions are not frightened of large numbers. They do not suffer from meganumerophobia, as he called it. Had this not been different in the monotheist mores of Judaism, Christianity and Islam?

His favoured illustration was the contrast between Christian and Hindu speculations about the age of the universe. Whereas Bishop Ussher's (1650) widely endorsed calculation on the basis of the Old Testament yielded the result that God's creation of the world had started on the evening of Saturday, 22 October of the year 4004 before Christ, present-day cosmologists have computed the age of the universe since the Big Bang at about 13.799 billion years. 'Of course', my friend said, 'this differs widely from pre-scientific Hindu estimates that our actual universe is in the 51st year of the present Brahma, that is, some 156 trillion years old'. But at least, he stressed, Hindus did not underestimate the age of the universe by framing it in terms of some childishly small numerical measure. Then he burst out laughing again and brought his peroration to its jocular climax. 'Indeed', he averred, 'monotheist believers are just like children. They cannot count further than three, and many of them not even beyond one.'

* * *

Jokes of debatable taste may raise crucial philosophical questions. If we interpret the endorsement by the faithful of a specific religious doctrine as holding it to be true, in the common sense of 'truth' as correspondence to reality, either Tantric polytheism or Christian (and Judaic, and Muslim) monotheism must be false, since on this interpretation they contradict each other. Surely, then, the facts of religious diversity raise an urgent issue of intellectual integrity for believers. Can they still be justified, warranted, or reasonable in holding on to their faith, if they are aware of the perplexing plurality of religions in the world? This is a central problem of Part I of the present volume, called 'The Reasonableness of Religious Beliefs' (Chapters 1 and 2).

One possible answer might proceed as follows. Reliable methods of religious research, or trustworthy primary sources of religious truth, have shown that a particular cluster of religious beliefs is true, whereas the

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competing clusters are all false. However, is there any reliable method of religious research, or a trustworthy source of religious truth? Chapter 1 on 'Religious Epistemology' provides a preliminary overview of religious methods or sources, such as revelations, prayer, possession rites, prophesies, and divine apparitions. After having examined two such sources, I argue that none of them can be validated as a reliable resource of religious beliefs, if at least these beliefs are interpreted as coherent claims to truth. In Chapter 2, 'Science and Religion', it is shown that for this very reason, traditional theological explanations of aspects of our universe have been eliminated gradually in the course of the history of scientific progress. In the sincere search for truth, scientific and scholarly methods have outcompeted religious methods, since the former could be validated whereas the latter could not. Shouldn't we conclude by means of a pessimistic induction that all religious claims to truth must be abandoned, at least if we aspire to intellectual integrity?

Part II of the book, entitled 'The Evolution of Religion and Ethics' (Chapters 3 and 4), starts from the provisional conclusion of Part I that religious beliefs do not rest on reliable epistemic sources or methods. If that is so, the fact that most humans endorse and cherish such beliefs is perplexing indeed. How should we explain it? Successful religions transfer their doctrines from one generation to the next, preferably by educating or indoctrinating children at an early age. What explains the fact that these beliefs arose in the first place? And which social or psychological functions are fulfilled by the endorsement of religious beliefs? During the last decades, so-called cognitive sciences of religion have made some progress in providing multiple answers to these questions.

Chapter 3, 'Religions: Origins and Evolution', starts from the fact that, as far as we know on the basis of historical and anthropological research, everywhere on Earth polytheist or animist religions preceded monotheist ones, if the latter arose at all. How should we account for this fact? Two different questions have to be answered. First: how to explain the ultimate origin of beliefs in the existence of supernatural beings? Various explanations are discussed briefly, from David Hume to the by-product hypothesis of a hypersensitive agent detection device, and their empirical credentials are assessed. Once originated, shared, stabilized, and institutionalized, religious beliefs may fulfil various psychological and communal functions. Religions are complex social systems, which have many different features. By appealing to some of these features and functions, one might try to answer the second question of this chapter: how can we explain the gradual cultural transition from polytheist religions to

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monotheisms? Two intermediate creeds are examined briefly. A Hume-inspired hypothesis about transitions to monotheism is developed and tested.

In Chapter 4, 'Religion and Ethics', many different topics are discussed. For example, how should we explain the contemporary dominance of so-called moralizing religions? According to cognitive anthropologists such as Nicolas Baumard and Pascal Boyer (2013), moralizing religions originated rather recently in human history, and they did so in relatively large-scale societies. I focus on the two moralizing monotheisms that have most adherents today, Christianity and Islam, and investigate some of the main mechanisms that explain their predominance. For example, it has been argued that by postulating an effective system of supernatural justice, human communities that endorsed one of these religions reinforced social cohesion and reduced free-riding more than competing communities. Other questions raised in this chapter are, for example, what explains the growth of the Jesus sect after Christ's crucifixion, and how should religious believers react to the urgent threat of human-induced global warming?

When we combine the results of the first two parts of this book, we will be inclined to conclude that they provide a debunking account of all religious beliefs. In other words, an argument to the best explanation of human religious creeds, together with background knowledge of various kinds, yields the conclusion that very probably these creeds are all false, if they are coherent and make any sense, or at least that endorsing them is objectively unjustified, to the extent that they posit the factual existence of a supernatural being. Monotheist believers will endorse this religious 'error theory' with regard to the gods worshipped by polytheist religions, whether bygone or still existing ones, such as Homeric, Germanic, Ancient Egyptian, Aboriginal, Hindu, Shinto, Tantric, voodoo, or traditionally Chinese faiths. However, they will reject it regarding their belief that only the god they worship *does* exist. Can monotheists justify such an exceptionalist position? That is: can one reasonably endorse faith in one particular god while being an atheist with regard to all the other gods humans have worshipped or still revere? In order to answer this question affirmatively, monotheist philosophers have developed many different apologetic strategies. Recent versions of such strategies are examined in Part III, 'Apologetic Strategies Evaluated' (Chapters 5–6).

Chapter 5, 'The Decision Tree for Religious Believers', starts by explaining why monotheists have developed so many different apologetic strategies. If a god really existed who is infinitely good, omnipotent, and

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omniscient, and who loves all human beings like a good father, one would expect, perhaps naively, that this god reveals himself openly to all human beings in their early childhood, as decent parents do. In that case, apologetic strategies would be superfluous. As we saw, however, the very idea of such a god arose relatively recently and only locally in human history. Even now, Her, His, or Their existence is not manifest to most of us. Given this fact of 'Divine hiddenness', one can understand that religious believers have developed many different apologetic strategies, since there is no easy and unambiguous access to the deity they worship. Wittgenstein-inspired philosophers of religion have even claimed that faith in God does not consist in, or rely on, a factual belief that a specific supernatural being exists at all. In my earlier book on the philosophy of religion, *God in the Age of Science? A Critique of Religious Reason* (2012), I classified these apologetic strategies by means of a Decision Tree for Religious Believers. Here I add new end nodes to the decision tree, and discuss the main non-argumentative strategies as exemplified in the oeuvre of prominent present-day religious philosophers.

Chapter 6 on 'Natural Theology' starts by summing up the history of Western natural theology, including its decline after the scientific revolution and its recent revival. It is the aim of this discipline to provide sound arguments and convincing evidence supporting a specific religious doctrine, such as the blend of monotheism called 'theism'. Since I criticized such arguments extensively in my (2012) book, and several other authors have refuted them as well, I do not discuss the many recently proposed versions of ontological, cosmological, fine-tuning, meta-ethical, etc. arguments for the existence of God. Rather, I focus on a number of structural difficulties, which show that the argumentative apologetic enterprise of natural theology is doomed to fail. As we will see, for example, the prior probability that a specific monotheistic god exists, such as Allah or God, is very low indeed, whereas it is problematic to attribute any predictive or explanatory power to theism.

The Conclusion of this book will function as Sundays do in some Western countries. Readers may take a rest and make up their mind about the existence of the many gods that humans have feared, adored, or still worship. If you decide to remain, or become, religious, will you prefer to believe in large numbers of gods, as many Tantric Hindus do, or restrict your faith to small numbers? If you are inclined towards the latter option, might it be not more reasonable to prefer zero to three or one? In other words, should Sunday still be considered to be the Day of the Lord? However this may be, we should enjoy it as the Day of the Sun, the *dies*

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Solis, because there are no good reasons to doubt whether the Sun exists, and its presence is a crucial condition for life on Earth.

* * *

The two core questions of the book are the following. First, how likely or probable is it that any particular god exists? Is it not much more plausible to conclude that all gods are human inventions? This first question ultimately is a philosophical one, and it belongs to the philosophy of religion, although many results of empirical research are needed for answering it properly. Second, how should we account for the occurrence and the functions of religious beliefs in human societies and individuals? This second question mainly belongs to the social sciences, while disciplines of the humanities, such as historical inquiry, are also essential for answering it. One of the innovative aspects of this volume is that it combines research concerning these two core questions.

As I shall argue, the ways in which the second question should be answered essentially depend on the reply to the first, philosophical one. Many empirical studies of religion seem to deny this dependence, since they claim to be religiously neutral and purely scientific. The converse dependence also exists, since specific empirical explanations of the mental and social functions of religious beliefs may support sceptical doubts concerning the truth of these beliefs. This interdependence of the two core questions explains the global composition of the book. The philosophical Parts I and III flank the empirical and explanatory second part.

With regard to the cultural evolution of monotheisms, I develop a somewhat speculative empirical hypothesis, which is inspired by David Hume and David Sloan Wilson. According to this hypothesis, the historical transition from polytheisms to monotheisms has been due mainly to specific evolutionary mechanisms of selection, which explain why monotheist individuals and groups have had a greater 'fitness' than polytheist ones.

The topic of religion is of relevance to all of us, whether we are religious believers or not. One reason for this relevance is that although advanced societies have become more secular over the last century – the United States is an exception to some extent only – the whole of humanity is becoming more religious. As research on *The Changing Global Religious Landscape* published by the Pew Research Center in 2017 predicts, in 2060 the percentage of religiously affiliated humans on Earth will be 87.5 per cent, which is higher than today. The main cause

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of the former development is that higher education and the resulting secularization tend to diminish drastically human fertility rates where contraceptives are available. Consequently, most secularized countries have fertility rates below the replacement level, whereas the rates of traditionally religious countries and communities substantially exceed it (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). Since on average the fast-growing human population on Earth is still becoming more religious rather than less, knowledge of religions and their motivating powers is indispensable for those who want to understand what is happening in our world and to base their actions on real evidence. For example, would the United States US-led coalition have invaded Iraq in 2003, spreading ‘shock and awe’, if the politicians in charge had known more about the religious diversity in that country, among other things?

Reason and Religion is aimed at various types of readers. Of course, I enter into debates with academic colleagues in philosophy, theology, and the sciences of religion. Yet I have tried as well to explain the many complex issues involved to a wide readership, so that the book is accessible to students in all disciplines and of interest to the general public. I hope that each of you will read with pleasure the following pages, whether you are a religious believer, agnostic, or an atheist.

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