

X2 – EXchanging Worldviews, 2: EXcavating Reasons Why People Are Religious

Dear: With his fable **The Cobbler Turned Doctor**, surely Aesop expected listeners to ask themselves: “Why do people ‘**entrust their heads [to clerics!] whom no one would employ to make even the shoes for their feet’?**” In this chapter, I want to begin to address that question (rephrased as “Why are people religious?”), but at the outset, I should admit that of course I don’t know the “complete” answer to the question – and as far as I’ve been able to determine, neither does anyone else. Nonetheless, I’ll mention a few obvious points and then offer some speculations and suggestions. In the next chapter, I’ll show you how others have made some sense of the data, looking at religions from both psychological and evolutionary perspectives.

An obvious point (recognized by many others) is both the importance of the question “Why are people religious?” and the difficulty in answering it. For example, Nanrei Kobori (about whom I only know, from Aiken’s collection of quotations,¹ is that he or she is “Buddhist Abbot of the Temple of the Shining Dragon”) stated:

God is an invention of Man. So the nature of God is only a shallow mystery. The deep mystery is the nature of Man.

Similarly, Murray Gell-Mann (winner of the 1969 Nobel Prize in physics) advised (also quoted here from Aiken’s collection):

I would recommend that skeptics devote even more effort than they do now to understanding the reasons why so many people want or need to believe.

Put differently: if Humanists are ever to succeed in expunging religious ignorance, it’s important to understand why people are religious – why they choose to “believe” in various gods – why they continue to accept the clerics’ moldy science as “gospel truth” – why they entrust their heads to those “**whom no one could employ to make even the shoes for their feet.**”

¹ Incidentally, Dear, whereas I’ll be making frequent reference in this chapter to Aiken’s collection of quotations, I should mention that, recently, I’ve been unable to get to it *via* the web address that I gave you in an earlier chapter (i.e., at <http://www4.ncsu.edu/~aiken/>). Maybe its unavailability is temporary, but if you, too, have trouble with that address, you can find his quotations at other sites *via* Google, e.g., at <http://www.fortunecity.com/meltingpot/israel/871/quotes.html>.

A second important point (also made by many others) is that, although it may even be “programmed” in the human DNA (as well as the DNA of other animals) to seek to identify causes (because doing so has always been critical for our survival), and therefore, it may be our “nature” to seek to identify causes of what’s not understood (which clerics have always attributed to their gods), yet, details about any particular religion is obviously a “learned behavior” (viz., nurture, not nature). Thus, as stated by “one of the major intellectual forces behind the women’s rights movement in 19th Century America”,² Ernestine Louise Rose (1810–1892):

It is an interesting and demonstrable fact, that all children are atheists, and were religion not inculcated into their minds, they would remain so.

More recently, Rosemary Lyndall (about whom all I know, again from Aiken’s collection, is that she’s a clinical neuro-psychologist) wrote:

Beliefs, including religious ones, are learned, which makes atheism a normal state of affairs and religious beliefs a learned ‘abnormality’. No psychological theory is necessary to explain the causes of a normal base state. Any psychological theory of learning, attitude change, or socialization can explain the causes of religious belief.

That is, although it seems natural for people to seek to identify causes and although it’s obviously simpler to assume that the cause is some magic man (a supernatural Jabberwock) in the sky (the fallacy of anthropomorphizing causes), rather than identify causes *via* the scientific method, yet, accepting details about such an assumed cause (i.e., dogma adopted in each religion) is obviously a *learned ‘abnormality’*, i.e., nurture rather than nature. And yet, although for most people religion is *inculcated into their minds*, some individuals (in earlier times and with wild imaginations) obviously did concoct their ideas about gods by themselves – and I know from experience that some people (such as your father) become religious even without parental indoctrination.

But, although it’s easy to agree that most people are taught to be religious and that a root cause (if not the root cause) of religions is ignorance about causes, it doesn’t necessarily follow that it’s easy to understand (or easy even to identify) the reasons why people adopt such teachings. That is, knowing little about psychology, I’m not competent to comment on Lyndall’s assessment that “*any psychological theory of learning, attitude*

² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernestine_Rose.

change, or socialization can explain the causes of religious belief.” In fact, from searching on the internet, I’ve concluded that there are a huge number of reasons why people adopt religious beliefs – and from my experience trying to dig out or “eXcavate” (this chapter) and “eXamine” (next chapter) those reasons, I have data that support the idea that understanding the reasons is nontrivial!

SOME POTENTIAL REASONS WHY PEOPLE ARE RELIGIOUS

As I already wrote, my goal for this chapter is to show you at least some of the reasons why people are religious and my limited understanding of these reasons. At the outset, however, I should caution you again about “the fallacy of the equivalence of information”, i.e., relying on the false premiss that, in the pursuit of some objective, all information is of equal value.

To start, I’ll succumb to this “equivalence fallacy” and just present a list of “titles” of possible reasons why people are religious, without yet trying to provide any suggestions about their relative importance – or even explaining what they mean! Following the listing, I’ll begin by at least explaining what I mean by the listed titles; later in the chapter, I’ll suggest how the relative importance of these different reasons might be determined.

To start, then, some potential reasons why people are religious seem to include:

Indoctrination, Caught in Logic Traps, Other Mistakes in Logic (identifying causes, identifying goals, in premisses, in deductions...), Fear, Apathy, Laziness, Stupidity, Superstition, Spiritualism, Tribalism, Herd Instinct, Hero Worship, Pack Instinct, some Psychosis (Narcissism, Paranoia...) or other Mental Problems (Schizophrenia, Epilepsy...), to Satisfy Some Desire [to Know, for Happiness, to “Get a Fresh Start”, to Have some Hope (e.g., for the continued existence of a loved one), to Belong, for an Extended Family, for a Father Figure, for Someone to Love, for Eternal Life...], Pursuit of Some Other Goal (Political, Economic, Social, to Find a Mate, to Promote Altruism...)...

From such a list, I assume you see what I meant by claiming there are many possible reasons why people are religious and that you’re beginning to see some of the problems caused by the equivalence-of-information fallacy.

* Go to other chapters *via*

Problems associated with the nonequivalence of information are similar to problems of putting a jigsaw puzzle together. Before tackling such problems, it's almost always necessary to first consider and distinguish the different pieces of information. Therefore, Dear, please bear with me while I first go through at least some of the topics in the above list of "reasons why people are religious" (to turn all the pieces of the puzzle right-side up and to try to get at least some hints of where they fit, e.g., by identifying edge pieces, predominant colors, maybe the components of some figures, etc.). I'll list the pieces under a number of headings, which I'll develop as I go along, starting with:

Indoctrination.

I start with 'indoctrination', Dear, in part because I already mentioned it in an earlier paragraph and in part because, if we were working on a jigsaw puzzle, then I'd maintain that 'indoctrination' is an "edge piece" if ever there was one! That is, maybe some progress can already be made on solving the problem of information nonequivalence: a huge quantity of totally obvious data supports the hypothesis that indoctrination is the prime reason why most people are religious. This hypothesis has clear predictive capability, and its predictions have been validated. In fact, it's predictions are so reliable that I'd be willing to bet you \$10 and give you ten-to-one odds that, if you continue to be a "good Mormon" and if you have children, then they, too, will at least start out as Mormons.

Similarly, Dear, surely the predominant reason why your mother is a "good Mormon" (and not a "devout Catholic" or a "traditional Jewish mother" or a "follower" of Allah, Buddha, Confucius... or Zarathustra) is not because she carefully studied the other "religions", evaluated them, and made a thoughtful choice, but solely because she was indoctrinated in Mormonism when she was a child. And surely the totally obvious fact (supported by somewhere around 4 billion data points!) that most people continue to "practice" the religion of their childhood (unless they decide that they're good enough that they no longer need to "practice" ☺) should make all thinking religious people (if that's not an oxymoron ☹) question the "truth" of their religion. Thus, Dear, surely you (whom I know to be a thinking person) must wonder if the Jews are right, or if the Christians, Muslims, Hindus... Zoroastrians are right – or if they're all wrong, and your grandfather finally got something right!

And I must admit, Dear, that I can't help wondering if, about 150 years ago, one or more of your even-older European ancestors (or your mother's side) didn't assess the situation in a manner something similar to the following:

Okay, I know it's all hokey, but reality's staring at me, in my face. Mormonism is clearly a crock, but then, so is Christianity and all other religions. But I can't make it here: I'm broke; I'll never own any land; if starvation isn't at the door, it's just down the street. Meanwhile, these Mormon morons are willing to sponsor me to get to America. So what do I have to lose? If the result is that my children get indoctrinated in Mormon madness, then on the one hand, it's probably not much worse than being indoctrinated in any other religion, and on the other hand, if my children or grandchildren or those that follow are sufficiently intelligent, sufficiently skeptical, sufficiently strong, then they'll be able to break free from any religious indoctrination and become not only the humans that I hope, but even that they'll be able to look back, understand my reasons, and not only forgive me but praise me for my decision.

To which I'd only add: “**Make ‘em proud, kid!**”

And of course religious indoctrination isn't just from parents: usually children are subjected to substantial state-supported propaganda, courtesy clerics. In this country, for example, in our Pledge of Allegiance there's the damnable phrase “**one country, under god**”, and on our currency there's the idiotic statement “**In God We Trust**”. Both of these phrases violate our Constitution (which states, at the beginning of the first of the Bill of Rights, “**Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion...**”), but most of our judges are too intimidated by the people and by politicians (who in turn are too intimidated by the people, who in turn are too intimidated by their own fears, indoctrinated by clerics and their parents) to be able to say, as I imagine your ancestor did: “**It's all hokey.**” Maybe such unlawful activity, such injustice, such ignorance, such fears will be eliminated during your lifetime, Dear, especially if you help: think about your ancestors (including a certain grandfather!) and “**Make ‘em proud**” But be that as it may, let me move on to another reason for religion, namely

Caught in Logic Traps.

I choose to look at this possibility, next, in large part because, if it weren't for your father getting himself caught in a logic trap (of his own making), you wouldn't have been indoctrinated in Mormonism. In one of the Y-chapters, I'll provide details of his personal logic trap, but in general, it was of the form that has trapped many people.

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In outline, one religious “logic trap” has the following form. A crisis develops in a person’s life, the person then pleads to an imagined god:

If only you’ll... [fill in the blank with whatever will relieve the crisis], then I promise that I’ll... [fill in the blank with whatever the sufferer proposes].

Then, when the crisis has passed (for whatever reason!! – and if the person is “honorable”), the person is trapped. Of course, those of us who care about the individual (and who aren’t caught in the clerics’ con game) try to convince him or her that there’s no justification for assuming that any god had anything to do with the outcome of the crisis, but almost always, it’s a fruitless attempt. To the delight of the clerics, they’ve caught another person in a logic trap – another victim who’ll do their biddings.

Another, equally tenacious logic trap ensnares many people who seek to alleviate their grief from the death of a loved one. Such people latch onto the clerics’ con (of course supported by zero data) that their loved one has “gone to a better place.” And of course, ever since caveman days, people have found personal support for the idea of an “afterlife”: thoughts of their “departed” loved ones are still in their minds, their “dearly departed” probably appear in their dreams, and they may even occasionally hear their loved one’s voice – in their minds. Thereby, the clerics have caught still another mark – to carry their useless carcasses.

Moreover, of the total number of religious people who “believe” in life after death (Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Mormons), I expect that a significant fraction are committed to the concept, not necessarily for their own benefit, but for the assumed benefit to loved ones who have died. With memories of the deceased still clear (and the appearance of their loved ones in their dreams), these religious people refuse to accept that their loved ones no longer exist, not only because their memories continue but also (and perhaps especially) because such a choice would seem to be to abandon their loved ones: if the people stopped believing that their loved ones weren’t “in a better place”, then it would be as if the people were condemning their loved ones to nonexistence (or worse). Since such a “heinous act” (condemning their loved ones to nonexistence) is unthinkable, such people absolutely refuse to accept the possibility that there’s no “afterlife.” How could they possibly show such hate toward their loved ones?

Parents (maybe especially mothers) whose children have died seem to be especially susceptible to being caught in such a logic trap, but others include those who have lost spouses, great friends, or deeply loved parents – maybe even grandparents! It's a logic trap because, by adopting the premiss (that there's an afterlife), the desired deduction (that the dead person lives on) requires that the premiss be adopted as being true.

Meanwhile, those of us not similarly logically trapped in the clerics' con game must be careful. Unlike the case when the person is trapped by their promise made during a crisis (now passed), the pain at losing a loved one continues. And it can be cruel to try to convince the duped person that, in reality, his or her loved one is simply dead.

In some cases, probably a person shouldn't attempt to show such people their logical error: their beliefs give them comfort in the face of enormous bereavement – so bad that, without such comforting thoughts, they might not have the will to live. In other cases, however, it can be safe – if the bereaving people can see that there's no longer any need to be concerned about the dead: they're okay, they're in absolutely no pain, they experience absolutely zero troubles, they couldn't be more "blissful", they've returned to the universe from which they arose, and their presence lives on in their loved one's minds. That said, let me move on to another possible reason why people are religious, namely,

Satisfying Instinctive Needs.

I've heard the argument that evidence for the "truth" of religion can be found in its "universality", by which is meant that essentially all cultures have some type of religion. But rather than representing the "truth" of religion, I wouldn't be surprised if the worldwide occurrence of religions reflects the fact that all humans are similar: we all feel the need to satisfy a host of instinctive needs, which in turn reflects our common (animal) origin. It would then be expected that all cultures concoct organizations to channel (and for the clerics to capitalize on!) our altruistic, herd, and pack instincts, our resulting propensity for tribalism, our desires for love, recognition, and the feeling of importance, our instinctive fears of the unknown (including death), and so on.

As you can see from the following quotation, Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong emphasizes that religion is thereby a search for security:

* Go to other chapters *via*

People don't realize religion is never a search for truth. Religion is a search for security. Now [i.e., currently], we have theological enterprises that try to shape truth. But the bedrock of our religion is a search for security. And that comes out of the very dawning of self-consciousness... [We] started out by naming every tree and rock and shrub and bush and river and ocean – it had a spirit. And we worked out a way of accommodating that spirit. That's where religion starts – in a search for security in a radically insecure world.

In a 15 October 2005 op-ed column in the New York Times, Nicholas Kristof made a similar point:

Islam is on the rise for many of the same reasons evangelical Christianity is surging: they provide a firm moral code, spiritual reassurance, and orderliness to people vexed by chaos and immorality around them, and they offer dignity to the poor.

For me, Kristof's final clause seems especially poignant when I think about my mother: “[religions] offer dignity to the poor” – although my cynicism then re-emerges, recalling the line by H.L. Mencken:

God is the immemorial refuge of the incompetent, the helpless, the miserable. They find not only sanctuary in His arms, but also a kind of superiority, soothing to their macerated egos: He will set them above their betters.

Yet I admit that the “egalitarian nature” of most religions, advocating in one form or another that “everyone is the same in the eyes of God”, is a way to promote a feeling that all of us probably have: that no matter our faults or our social stature, yet each of us is still “worthwhile”. I expect that those people who don't feel this way are likely to commit suicide.

In any event, in early chapters I've commented on most of the “instinctive needs” that people seek to satisfy *via* their religions; here, therefore, I'll just list a few “afterthoughts”.

- It amazes me that, while people yield to their herding instinct (gathering in religious groups, like sheep – because predators can attack only at the perimeters), clerics simultaneously capitalize on their pack instinct (like wolves, preying on the weak) – and attack their prey from inside the herd! As the clerics' Jesus allegedly said (here paraphrased): Beware of wolves wearing sheepskin!
- It amazes me, also, how competent the clerics are in capitalizing on people's altruistic instincts: similar to other “social animals” (dolphins, monkeys, whales...) we humans instinctively want to help others who are hurting, but whereas in complex groups our altruism can't always be enacted directly, religious con artists propose to channel our contributions – and charge an enormous “commission” for their services!

And thus the head of the Mormon Church has a million-dollar-per-year “expense account” (alone, not to mention his salary!), and I’m sure that the “commission” charged (plus the commissions of his cohorts) sums to peanuts compared with the commissions charged by the Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Muslim clerics, which I expect are billions of dollars per year.

- Yet, I expect that, for at least another generation (if not a century), people will continue to be conned by such schemes – maybe especially women, who seem to be especially susceptible to being followers and to show their “love” for the “alpha male”, maybe especially if they can thereby gain a share of his power!
- I wonder, also, what contribution to “religiosity” arises from the human propensity to idolize (even to “worship”) heroes. Innumerable examples are available: people who sing idolize those whom they consider “singing stars” – and similarly in all sports and in essentially all vocations, including science. And, too, it’s not uncommon for people to be “devoted followers” even of fictional characters, such a characters in the Star Trek series! [Who, me?!] I wonder if similar occurs for “devoted followers” of Joseph Smith, Muhammad, and (the fictional character?) Jesus. Is such idolization of “heroes” a component of the herd instinct, following some leader?
- All of which seems to be manifestations of human propensity (instinct?) toward tribalism. I’ll put it this way: if anyone feels the need to join with a group in worshipping any “hero god”, then I wouldn’t be surprised if their desire to belong to a group is stronger than their devotion to the god. Otherwise, why not do as the cleric’s Jesus reportedly said: go and pray in the closet?
- Further, I wouldn’t be surprised if one of the main attractions of committing oneself to some god is in the payback it provides the worshiper, satisfying the instinctive need to feel important. If people can convince themselves that they have a one-on-one relationship with no less than the creator of the universe, then surely that convinces them of their importance! As someone else said: “It’s egotism gone berserk!”
- And then there’s the sadness of it all. When their instincts are unconstrained, humans revert to being animals (or even worse than animals, because most animals kill only to eat, rarely kill members of their own species, and never kill over just ideas – except maybe if some other male has the “idea” of mating with his female!), but when their instincts are overly constrained (as in most religions), humans are reduced to little more than robots – in some case, programmed to kill, e.g., “the unbelievers”. Would that people could find the “happy mean”!

And while listing the possible reasons for the worldwide occurrence of religions, of course I should include the worldwide human awareness of our death – and the fear of death by youngsters. This “instinctive” fear of death is, of course, the key to our avoiding it, i.e., the key to our survival.

I should add, Dear, that I mentioned only the fear of death by youngsters (including those younger than about 50!), because many old people no longer fear death. As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, on her deathbed my mother said she was weary and that she thought she had lived long enough – and added “probably too long.” And I, too, am getting tired. Thus, Dear, you may think that you understand your own thoughts about death, but I doubt that any of us appreciate how we will think about our death in old age until we approach it.

Also, there’s the associated instinctive fear of the unknown. Being wary of the unknown has survival value. To overcome fear of the unknown, humans try to learn about it: scientists study it; those people who find such studies too difficult find other ways to cope with the unknown. For example, some people accept the explanations for the unknown preached by those who can convincingly argue that they understand it. But be careful, Dear, because such people are selling a bill of goods: knowing the unknown is another oxymoron.

Fear

I address ‘fear’ separately, Dear, because it came up in both “sections”, above: in the case of indoctrination (dealing with the fear of judges and politicians of losing power) and in the case of satisfying instinctive needs (dealing with the fear of death and of facing other unknowns). And immediately upon considering the possibility that alleviating fear may be an important reason why people become religious, the need to distinguish among different types of fears seems obvious.

Different types of fear include fear of being ostracized (i.e., some social pressure), fear of losing love (either from a person or a god!), fear of death (also known as necrophobia), fear of losing life-after-death (though totally fearless of oxymorons!), fear of eternal punishment in some Hell (although what hell could be worse than living your life in fear of Hell is beyond me!), and so on. And actually, it’s somewhat amazing to me that clerics manage to package all such fears in a single bundle: “Fear of the Lord” – and especially, fear his spokesmen, i.e., the clerics.

You can see how the clerics manage to do the packaging in the Bible at *Job* 28, 20 [to which I’ve added a few notes in brackets]:

Where then does wisdom come from? [Answer: experience.] Where does understanding dwell? [Answer: in applications of the scientific method.] It is hidden from the eyes of every living thing, concealed even from the birds of the air. [Riiight] Destruction and Death say, “Only a rumor of it has reached our ears.” [I didn’t know they could talk!] God understands the way to it and he alone knows where it dwells, for he views the ends of the earth [and where, I wonder, would be “the end” of a spherically shaped Earth?!] and sees everything under the heavens. [Riiight] When he established the force of the wind [sure he did] and measured out the waters [for what would the waters be if someone didn’t “measure” them?!], when he made a decree for the rain [just as the Egyptian god Re did] and a path for the thunderstorm [are you describing Yahweh, Zeus, or Thor?], then he looked at wisdom and appraised it; he confirmed it and tested it. [That is, apparently God applied the scientific method!] And he said to man, “The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom [Riiight], and to shun evil is understanding [and of course it’ll be the clerics who’ll define ‘evil’ for you, e.g., not putting enough money in their collection plates!].”

But I should admit that I have difficulty comprehending such fears as mentioned above, because I don’t have much appropriate experience. Immediately, however, I should add: certainly it’s not because I’m courageous (and, therefore, “don’t have much appropriate experience” with such fears). In fact, absence of fear is usually a sign of insensitivity (even stupidity); courage is being able to face one’s fears! It’s just that, if I consider the major fears I’ve experienced, none stimulated me to become religious. Let me list some examples:

- My first conscious memory is one of fear – and I can still remember the incident clearly. I was probably two or three years old. The “traveling grocer” parked his truck near our house, and while my mother was inside the truck selecting groceries, I asked the driver what was “up there” (in the rack, on top of the truck). The brute answered: “That’s where we put bad little boys.” That scared me for years [and I don’t recall that I did anything to provoke him to make such a comment], but I don’t recall that the incident had any religious repercussions – it just made me reluctant to go near that horrible person again.
- Also, I still clearly remember a fearful incident when I was about six. I awoke during the night, and for some reason, I wandered into the living room. Across the room, with the help of a little moonlight, I saw a man sitting in the corner chair. I said “Dad?” [He hadn’t been home in a long time, maybe years.] The man in the moonlight said nothing. I probably repeated my inquiry, and he still said nothing. I called “Mom!”, and awakened, she came. I said “Dad’s there.” She said, “Steve, is that you?” No answer. I don’t recall if she lit a lamp or not, but within a minute or so, she found that “the man” in the corner was just a shadow from the moonlight. I was terrorized by the incident, but don’t recall any alleviation of my terror from any god – beyond my mother.

- When I was a kid, between the ages of maybe 8 to 10, we did some really stupid stuff. There was a “gang” of us, led by a fellow whose name I’ll omit but whom I remember perfectly. He was about five years older than I was, but wasn’t much taller – and we all knew that he challenged us to duplicate his daring stunts in an attempt to compensate for his size. In particular, I remember my fear of diving off the top of the shed on the wharf at low tide. I was no longer afraid of diving off just the wharf at low tide (a ~50 foot dive): by intertwining my fingers and making a “double fist” and by just “rolling into” the dive (rather than pumping with my legs), then when I hit the water, it usually didn’t hurt my head too much. But that little daredevil climbed to the top of the shed (another 15 feet or so), and dared us to follow. The extra height didn’t scare me that much, but there were two things that did: 1) I could no longer see the water into which I’d dive (the shed had a steep roof, but not steep enough to permit seeing where you’d hit the water, and starting from the crest of the roof, once you became committed to the dive, running down the metal roof, you couldn’t stop – and if someone came along in a rowboat, you’d never see it), and 2) By starting the dive “on the run”, it was harder to remember to get your hands into a double fist (to break the water) and more frighteningly, much harder to ensure that you’d enter the water vertically, rather than on your back (which could do much worse than just hurt terribly). But I conquered my fear and dove – and maybe I even conquered some of my stupidity, because after that, I don’t recall that we hung around with that kid much any more.
- When I was 8 to 13 or so, I certainly remember walking home from the movie theater at night, alone, along the road through the woods, and hearing noises. During daylight, my nearest-age brother and I would sometimes chase brown bears on our bikes, and I knew that there were cougars in the woods – ‘cause I had heard them “screech” – and the ones that people had killed were as big as I was. Talk about being scared – but not quite scared enough, I guess (or not smart enough – or too scared of what other kids would say) to stop attending the movies!
- And then there was more of that low-level fear that must have persisted between the ages of ~6 to 16, worried about what other kids would think or say or do. We were “dirt poor” (until finally, when I was about 13, we “hit it rich” and went on welfare!) and I was always afraid of being “ostracized” for being so poor: ragged clothes, crummy shoes, few possessions, and so on. [By the way, I had enough money to attend the movies (which cost 35¢) by picking strawberries, selling fish, doing my paper route, and by chopping wood and doing errands for neighbors.] In addition, after we went on welfare, I was instructed to be fearful of letting anyone know that we were on welfare. Meanwhile, I was instinctively fearful of being found out that I didn’t “belong”: that my T-shirt was always tight about my neck (similar to the other kids) because I had pinned it tight, at the back, with a safety pin (how dangerously stupid that was!); that my school lunches were made of home-made bread, because “I like it” not because we couldn’t afford “store-bought bread”; and on and on. I was especially fearful of any social function (birthday parties, dances...), worried that I’d be “found out.” To this day, I still have a little of that fear remaining – although during the past ~50 years, your grandmother has taught me most of what passes for

“social graces” – again showing that I got no help from any gods, beyond the women in my life.

- And as I mentioned in an earlier chapter, I’ve also experienced “death terror” (waking in the middle of the night, realizing that I soon would die), although I think that this was more fear of losing this one opportunity to live rather than any fear of death (i.e., of the unknown). Also, I had the long-lasting fear (which I think I also mentioned in earlier chapters) of my not being able to finish my Ph.D. thesis, which led to recurring nightmares for decades. In fact, a few nights ago, I had another one– requiring me to wake up and to remember that, in fact, I did finish it. But actually, I think that it’s now a “transfer nightmare”: I think my subconscious mind is now responding to my fear of not finishing this book!

And the way that the above dragged on and on, maybe I should congratulate my subconscious for being so perceptive! But more to the point, Dear, if you’re wondering what all the above was about (besides the ramblings of your old grandfather), it was to show you “where I’m coming from” in preparation to showing you “where I’m going.” That is, before commenting on the possible role of fear as a reason for religion, I thought I should first show you that I have limited experiences with fear – and therefore, my comments should be appropriately weighted.

For example, Dear, I have difficulty accepting suggestions that the fear of “eternal punishment in Hell” is an important reason why anyone is religious – except maybe for very small, impressionable, and maybe mentally retarded children. I admit that, when I was about three, that brute grocer scared me with his, “**That’s where we put bad little boys**” – but I saw a real rack, loaded with real boxes on top of a real truck! In contrast, I don’t recall ever being scared by just words or paintings used to describe Hell by priests of our parish. But maybe that just reflects my inadequacies in forming mental images from words or paintings.

I was scared by “the man” in the corner chair in the moonlight and by the noises in the woods at night, but the shadows seemed to outline a person, I had seen real bears and cougars, and the sounds in the forest were real. Consequently, when as a child I heard stuff from clerics about “**fear the Lord**” and “**gnashing of teeth**” and “**fire and brimstone**” (or now read similar and even more hideous stuff in the Quran and in the Book of Mormon), I’m “afraid” I just don’t get it: how could even a little kid be frightened by such pathetic attempts to scare people. Hell, if you wanna scare kids, take ‘em into the forest at night or to the top of a shed on a wharf at low tide!

And I'm similarly "afraid" that I "just don't get it" when I hear your mother express her concern (her fear?) about the fate of her "eternal soul". I can't seem to get into that mind set. If she's afraid, then maybe she should try diving off a wharf at low tide (let alone from atop a shed on the wharf); if she could conquer that fear, then maybe she could conquer her concern about the fate of her eternal soul. If she doesn't want to do that, then maybe she could profit from what the "profit" Joe Smith said (which you can find on the internet and which I admit I rather like): "Hell is by no means the place this world of fools suppose it to be, but on the contrary, it's quite an agreeable place."

But be that as it may be, my experiences and thoughts lead me to this. If I thought I had an eternal soul (but there's zero evidence that such things exist), if I thought that God was anything more than a meaningless word concocted by savages (but there's zero evidence that it is), and if "God" didn't like the way I lived my life, then I'd tell "him" to go to Hell: I detest brutes who scare little kids with descriptions of where they put "bad little boys"; I would suggest that anyone who would scare little kids into doing what he wants, by threatening to torture them for eternity in Hell, is a devil (and that goes for Zarathustra, the clerics' Jesus, "Saint" Paul, Muhammad, Joseph Smith, and all associated, damnable clerics).

And although I don't understand how people can be afraid of such "clearly invented balderdash", I do have experience with the fear of being ostracized. Therefore, I can understand that some people would profess "belief" in what they're told to "believe", because they're afraid of what people may say or do to them if they describe it all as "clearly invented balderdash".

When I was a kid, I didn't experience religious versions of such coercion: on the one hand, the kids that I knew didn't seem to care much about religion, one way or another, and on the other hand, even if some did, I had been identified as "one of those Catholics", because we left the classroom every morning, while the other kids stayed and said the Lord's prayer "the wrong way", and I quite willingly left the room, 'cause it was an easy way to get out of school, at least for a few minutes! But I expect that such coercion is much worse in Mormonism (because the Mormons I have known cling together in such tight groups), and I can imagine that leaving Mormonism would require abandoning essentially all one's "friends" (or better, "former cohorts").

Apparently, it's even worse in Islamic countries. I've read letters posted on the internet from Muslims who are afraid to express doubts about Islam and support for Humanism, for fear of being murdered – if not by “the religious police” then “simply” by their neighbors! Similar seems to have occurred in the early years of close-knit Mormon communities, with their notorious “Danites” (squads of executioners). And of course, similar was widespread in Christianity during the Dark Ages and in Judaism (Moses allegedly even made it a law that an unbeliever was to be stoned to death). But now, for most of us in America (except for those trapped in some “religious cult” – as Mormonism is frequently described), we live in a sufficiently open and multi-cultural society that we don't need to face the fear of being murdered for expressing opposition to prevailing views (provided we express them in a sufficiently “politically correct” manner). Yet, there remains the fear of being ostracized – and although I no longer fear the opinions of most others (your grandmother being an exception!), I still won't put my name on this book, for fear of the harm that might come to certain grandchildren.

Now, Dear, I could continue sketching other fears that might drive people to be (or to continue to be) religious – such as fears of losing friends, loneliness, misery, depravation, despair, death, etc. – but I admit that I'm getting rather tired of detailing such depravity. Instead, therefore, let me start on some other topics, which can be found on the other side of the same coin. Thus, rather than go into details about loneliness, misery, etc., I'll start on some of the “happy reasons” for being religious (such as finding friends, company, companionship, extended family, help, a new start, hope, etc.), which I'll label under the following title (even though it might not be “good English”):

Mental Wellness.

I don't plan to go into details describing reasons in this category, Dear, because you already know such details better than I. Further, I admit that, from the little I know about the “social aspects” of Mormonism and other religions, the Mormon Church does seem to do a good job promoting its members to behave as if they were in an extended family (with picnics, team sports, dances, visiting others, helping others, and so on, even including addressing fellow members as “brothers” and “sisters”). The pity of all this “socialization”, however, is that it's primarily restricted to fellow Mormons – just as such activities are similarly restricted in other religions.

* Go to other chapters *via*

It's a pity that people who put so much energy into organizing such activities wouldn't be more inclusive, wouldn't put so much emphasis on what's written in moldy old books, and instead, would energize similar activities for the entire communities in which they live – organizing community picnics, team sports, teenage activities, helping others, etc., out to an including becoming involved in worldwide nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as Save the Children Foundation, CARE, the Red Cross, and hundreds of other NGOs. Put another way: if people want to swim, play tennis, sing in a choir, help in a hospital, etc., then why join a social club requiring them to think in a certain way? To me that's a sign of:

Mental Weakness.

Given how much I've already written in this book about religion being “bad science”, I don't plan to write much about “mental weakness” as another reason why people are religious. Nonetheless, Dear, because I'm really quite concerned about resulting danger to you from ignorant people, I'll mention a few points, listed under the indicated subheadings.

Simpletons

Maybe a more appropriate subheading should be used, Dear, but whatever term is used to describe such people, beware of those who have adopted simple answers to complicated questions:

Why is the sky blue? – “Because that's the way God made it.”

Why do bad things happen to good people? – “God has his reasons.”

Why is there so much evil in the world? – “God works in mysterious ways.”

If anyone has answers to all your questions, Dear, then you can be fairly confident that they don't know what they're talking about – and that includes a certain grandfather! Listen for the tremendous phrase: “I dunno.” Extending what Eliezer Yudkowsky stated,³ I'd say: “If your explanation explains everything, then your explanation is worthless.”

Laziness

Someone using the pseudonym Phideaux summarized this category well:⁴

³ At <http://yudkowsky.net/bayes/technical.html>.

⁴ From http://www.atheists.org/nogodblog/index.php/2005/08/04/can_religion_be_cured_the_god_gene.

Or maybe people are just lazy. It's easy to have religion provide "McAnswers" and promise eternal life. You don't have the extra burden of being responsible in an existential way to define your own purpose. You can delay the urgent feeling of really living, because you think you have eternity to exist.

Circular Reasoning

If you encounter people who in response to the question "Who made this universe?" answer "God did", and if you subsequently find that their definition of "God" is "the one who made the universe", then, Dear, I'd encourage you to try to distance yourself from such stupid people, whose thoughts run in circles. Similarly, if you ask them "How do you know that your 'holy book' contains communications from God?", and their response is something similar to "Because it says so in our Holy Book", then again I encourage you to try to disengage from them.

And I encourage you to disengage from such people (rather than show them their errors), Dear, because from a lifetime of experiences, I've found that it's essentially impossible to get such people to comprehend their errors. In every case I've encountered, I've found that such people have invested so much time and emotion in their circular thoughts that they don't want to, or won't, or can't break free. And if they can't break free, it's typically because they're entrapped in more circular logic: to doubt what they've adopted as "true" is to demonstrate "disbelief", and yet, the only way to gain the perks of their religion is to "believe" that their religion is "true" – which may be the ultimate Catch-22.

Mistaken Inferences

As I've written before, considerable credit is due our primitive ancestors (including animals!) who proposed and tested the idea of causality: from a host of particulars, they postulated that all effects have their causes. Subsequently, however, our ancestors made a grievous error: they assumed that the causes of many effects (including the existence of the universe) were "the gods" – about whom all that was "known" (and all that has ever been known in this circular logic) was that they were the unknown causes of the observed effects! That is, unfortunately but understandably, our ancestors didn't apply the scientific method to all their speculations: they didn't seek to identify predictions of their "god hypothesis" (and then should have developed methods to test their predictions) – which is the only known way to gain understanding of the world external to our minds.

Damnable Deducers

Although this is another category of “mental weakness”, yet the importance of having a “handy sack of ready-to-use axioms” probably can’t be overstated; they come, however (as I’ve described before), with grave dangers. In general, Dear, please be careful to avoid not only getting locked into other people’s thoughts (including mine!), but even getting hooked on how other people think. Be careful of “reductionists” (those who are always oversimplifying), “seductionists” (those who are always appealing to emotions), and those who so commonly think *via* analogies (e.g., “Well, it’s as if...”). But, Dear, please be especially careful of the “deductionists” who seem incapable of thinking for themselves, deducing essentially everything from some “authority”, such as some “axiom” or some “holy book”.

You’ve already been overly exposed to “deductionists”, i.e., those people whose most common thought process seems to be “**God wants us to...**” or “**Our holy books says...**” This procedure is especially prevalent among right-wing Christians (The Christian “Reich”!) who seem to start most of their thoughts with “**According to the Gospel of...**”, among Muslims who start theirs with “**According to the Holy Quran...**”, and among various Jewish sects who start theirs with “**The Torah says...**” or “**The Talmud says...**” or “**The Cabala says...**” Such people are walking encyclopedias of dead ideas.

Please don’t forget, Dear, that new information can’t be obtained *via* deductions: the conclusions are *always* contained in the premisses. In contrast, the way to generate new knowledge is *via* the scientific method: observe, analyze the data, succinctly summarize the data with a hypothesis, derive predictions from your hypothesis, test the predictions, analyze the data – and keep repeating the procedure until you find a hypothesis that works!

Also, Dear, please remember that, although it’s possible for faulty premisses to lead to sound conclusions, it’s far more likely that faulty premisses lead to unsound conclusions. For example, many religionists will argue something similar to:

God is the ruler of the universe, and in our Holy Book, he communicated to us rules for living, such as to be kind to one another; therefore, it’s your moral duty to be kind to other people.

Thus, a sound conclusion can be reached from faulty premisses. Meanwhile, though, the same sound conclusion can also be reached from premisses that can be validated by experience, such as: “It’s better to live among friendly than unfriendly people”, “What goes around comes around”, and “Always, the best thing to do is use your brain as best you can.”

Far more likely, however, is that the “damnable deducers” will start from faulty premisses and then proceed to deduce absolutely horrible conclusions. Thus, from their untested assumptions that the gods were in control and could be placated with tributes and genuflections such as prayers of adoration (similar to the way rulers of their tribes could be placated), our ancient ancestors proceeded to deduce all sorts of gibberish, garbage, and hideousness: that the volcano god would be placated if they pushed young girls into the volcano, that the sky god would be placated if they slaughtered their children, and so on it went: wasting resources building pyramids, temples, and other “monuments to folly”, paying their priest with still more “sin offerings”, etc.

Worse, following the advice of the damnable clerics (who claimed to know what the gods wanted and were hooked on the proceeds of their con games), people proceeded to slaughter people who “worshipped” other gods – and probably more significantly to the clerics, paid other priests!

Horribly, the same idiocy continues to this day – not only while “martyrs for the Jihad” murder still more innocent people but also throughout every community even in this country. Thus, convinced that they have “knowledge” about “the wonders of the Lord”, the damnable clerics in this country deduce that homosexuality is an “abomination before the Lord”, as is sexual activity outside of marriage, abortion, euthanasia, and all their other stupid “deductions from ignorance” – maybe even including that it’s a sin to vote for ____ . [They fill in the blank!] Fortunately, after thousands of years of martyrdom, Humanists have been able to educate at least some of these damnable deducers to abandon slavery, racism, denigration of women, raping of the environment, etc., but it was such a horribly long time to convince even some of them that their deductions were wrong – and sometimes, it still seems impossible to convince them that their premisses are nothing but primitive speculations based on zero data.

Therefore, Dear, please try to disengage from all such people, especially all clerics. If it'll help you, assume that they have a new form of AIDS, which infects by "word of mouth": Acquired Ignorance from Deduced Stupidities! Never forget, Dear, that deductions can be dangerous. With inductions, the next step may be wrong – but it will be corrected when the consequences of the next step are tested experimentally. In deductions, in contrast, if just the first step is wrong (e.g., the premiss that God is anything more than a meaningless word), then all subsequent steps will almost certainly be wrong.

Blissful Ignorance

As for the people in the category of "mental weakness" that I label as "blissful ignorance", I'd again encourage you not to waste your time and emotion (and risk your safety) trying to show them their errors. I've found that they don't want to change, mainly because they're happy living in their delusions. Recall what Thomas Gray (1716–1771) wrote: "[Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise.](#)" Also, as I already showed you, there's the insightful assessment by H.L. Mencken:

[God is the immemorial refuge of the incompetent, the helpless, the miserable. They find not only sanctuary in His arms, but also a kind of superiority, soothing to their macerated egos – He will set them above their betters!](#)

And actually, Dear, there's more to this "pleasure principle", which you might want to investigate. To introduce you to some of the ideas, I'll start by quoting one of Sharon Begley's columns:⁵

[Life is full of surprises, but it's rare to reach for a carafe of wine and find your hand clutching a bottle of milk – and even rarer, you'd think, to react by deciding the milk was actually what you wanted all along.](#)

[Yet something like that happened when scientists in Sweden asked people to choose which of two women's photos they found most attractive. After the subject made his choice, whom we'll call Beth, the experimenter turned the chosen photo face down. Sliding it across the table, he asked the subject the reasons he chose the photo he did. But the experimenter was a sleight-of-hand artist. A copy of the unchosen photo, "Grizelda," was tucked behind Beth's, so what he actually slid was the duplicate of Grizelda, palming Beth.](#)

⁵ I'm one of Sharon's "official" fans, with communications to prove it! With tremendous competence, she writes a weekly column in *The Wall Street Journal* entitled Science Journal. The quotation is from her 28 October 2005 column. Addendum: As of mid-2007, she's now writing for *Newsweek*.

Few subjects batted an eye. Looking at the unchosen Grizelda, they smoothly explained why they had chosen her (“she was smiling,” “she looks hot”), even though they hadn’t.

In 1966, *Time* magazine asked, “Is God Dead?” Even then, the answer was no, and with the rise of religion in the public square, the question now seems ludicrous. In one of those strange-bedfellows things, it is science that is shedding light on why belief in God will never die, at least until humans evolve very different brains, brains that don’t (as they did with Beth and Grizelda) interpret unexpected and even unwanted outcomes as being for the best.

“Belief in God,” says Daniel Gilbert, professor of psychology at Harvard University, “is compelled by the way our brains work.”

As shown in the Grizelda-and-Beth study, by scientists at Lund University and published this month in *Science*, brains have a remarkable talent for reframing suboptimal outcomes to see setbacks in the best possible light. You can see it when high-school seniors decide that colleges that rejected them really weren’t much good, come to think of it...

“People don’t know how good they are at finding something desirable in almost any outcome,” he says. “So when there is a good outcome, they’re surprised, and they conclude that someone else has engineered their fate” – a lab’s subliminal message or, in real life, God.

Religion used to be ascribed to a wish to escape mortality by invoking an afterlife or to feel less alone in the world. Now, some anthropologists and psychologists suspect that religious belief is what Pascal Boyer of Washington University, St. Louis, calls in a 2003 paper “a predictable by-product of ordinary cognitive function”...

Thereby, Dear, maybe we have a “blind spot” not only in our vision (demonstrating the lack of intelligence in any “intelligent designer”!) but also in the way we think: apparently there was (and maybe still is!) survival value in interpreting outcomes in the “best possible light” – which then might make us even more prone to the proof-by-pleasure logical fallacy (one of the many logical errors that I addressed in an earlier chapter).

In addition (and as I’ve written before), religious people seem to be happy with their delusions, because they’ve convinced themselves that they’re making progress towards their imaginary goals. Recall that people are happy if they think that they’re making progress toward their goals – even if they’re not, and even if their goals are imaginary.

The goals of religious people are whatever the clerics tell them are their goals [not sinning, fearing the Lord, getting into paradise, paying their tithes, helping others, killing “unbelievers” (in their fairy tales), whatever], and once the people accept such goals, the clerics simply provide the people with measures of their progress, i.e., signals causing happiness (or its antithesis). It’s the case, of course, that religions can provide other “happiness signals”, such as those I’ve already mentioned (feelings of importance, of belonging, etc., and from satisfying various instinctive needs), but for many religious people (especially Christians, Muslims, and Mormons) a principal component of their happiness seems to be that they’re convinced that they’re making progress toward their imagined goal of eternal life. Thereby, a root reason for religion seems to be that religious people adopt foolish goals.

Usually for power-mongering reasons of their own, religious con artists (viz., clerics) convince people unable to think for themselves into “believing” that the standard against which human values is to be judged is set, not by humans (e.g., for the benefit of humanity), but by some omnipotent will-of-the-wisp in the sky, called by the name of their god, with whom the religious con artists just happen to be in direct contact. And, of course it’s these same con artists who claim that they just happen to be the ones able to measure human values against the god’s goals. Unsurprisingly, this claimed capability of the con artists give them absolutely astounding power over all who are unable or who refuse to think for themselves: the clerics set the values and their priorities, the sheep accept these values and priorities as their goals, and then (if called upon to do so) the people happily move toward the gates to be eaten by the lions, drink poison in their mass suicide, tie explosives around their waists to die for the “Jihad”, and so on. All of which then leads me to another “reason for religion”:

Mental Illness.

I admit, Dear, that with little knowledge of either psychology or the physiology of the brain, I don’t know where “lines should be drawn” between mental wellness, mental weakness, and mental illness. Most people in our society have apparently concluded (out of mental weakness?) that it’s NOT a sign of mental illness to live one’s life pursuing the imaginary goal of living for eternity in a paradise ruled by some giant Jabberwock in the sky, whereas it IS a sign of mental illness to assume that the Jabberwock is from Mars (or some another planet) – except Mormons, who’ve been taught that he’s from near the star Kolob – wherever it is!

On the other hand, most people in our society (but not in Muslim societies) assume it's a sign of mental illness "believing" that a sure way to get into the magic man's paradise is to fly hijacked planes into skyscrapers. It therefore appears that for most people, the distinction between mental illness and wellness is sometimes culturally dependent – except insofar as most people in most cultures seem to be certain that people have definitely "lost it" if they've concluded that there never was any magic man in the sky!

My untutored inclination, however, is to "draw the line" between mental illness and mental wellness by referencing a person's motivating assumptions to reality. As examples:

- If a person is primarily motivated by responding to "objective reality" (sounds, sights, smells, food deprivation, stimuli that result in pleasant feelings, and so on – all stimuli that other observers agree do exist in reality), then I'd suggest that the person is mentally well.
- In contrast, if a person is primarily motivated by voices or visions that all "objective tests" suggest do not exist in the reality external to the person's mind, then I'd say that the poor person is mentally ill (possibly schizophrenic) and needs psychiatric help.⁶
- Similarly, if a person is primarily motivated by his image of himself that he thinks exists in the minds of other people (e.g., if he thinks that they think he's smart or prosperous or... then he acts out the part of being smart or prosperous or...), then I'd suggest that the person is mentally ill (narcissistic) and needs professional help.
- And if a person is primarily motivated by misinterpreting real signals from his environment (e.g., misinterpreting glances as being "watched", misinterpreting casual comments as "threats", etc.), then I'd suggest that he's paranoid and needs help.

And let me add that, with such distinctions between mental illness and wellness, it follows that all religious people are mentally ill – because their primary motivations (i.e., gods and their desires) have no objective reality.

Now, Dear, of course it's true that many of "the trappings" of a person's religion do have an objective reality: a real church, a real choir, a real book (called "holy"), etc., not to dwell on the reality of other members of the congregation, their communications and glances, and so on. In addition, in

⁶ As you may know, Dear recently there have been suggestions by knowledgeable people that the term "schizophrenia" [literally meaning "split brain"] shouldn't be used. I'll show you some of their reasons later in this chapter. In the meantime, though, I'll continue to use the term.

most societies, these other members of the congregation (parents, priests, politicians...) expend substantial time, effort, and money promoting the idea that the god of their religion has an objective reality and that he IS watching them. But, Dear, as I've tried to show you in earlier chapters (especially those in which I tried to show you that "belief in god is bad science"), no data support assumptions that any god ever had, has, or will have any objective reality. All evidence (or better, lack thereof!) suggests that gods are nothing but illusions, that all religions are then nothing but delusions, and therefore, that all religious people are delusional (i.e., mentally ill).

Certainly I'm not alone in concluding that religious people are mentally ill. For example, approximately 500 years ago, the humanist Desiderius Erasmus (1465–1536) wrote:

To sum up (or I shall be pursuing the infinite), it is quite clear that the Christian religion has a kind of kinship with folly in some form, though it has none at all with wisdom. If you want proofs of this, first consider the fact that the very young and the very old, women and simpletons, are the people who take the greatest delight in sacred and holy things, and are therefore always found nearest the altars, led there doubtless solely by their natural instinct. Secondly, you can see how the first great founders of the faith were great lovers of simplicity and bitter enemies of learning. Finally, the biggest fools of all appear to be those who have once been wholly possessed by zeal for Christian piety. They squander their possessions, ignore insults, submit to being cheated, make no distinction between friends and enemies, shun pleasure, sustain themselves on fasting, vigils, tears, toil and humiliations, scorn life and desire only death – in short, they seem to be dead to any normal feelings, as if their spirit dwelt elsewhere than in their body. What else can that be but madness? And so we should not be surprised if the apostles were thought to be drunk on new wine, and Festus judged Paul to be mad.

Others have said similar. For example, Nietzsche wrote:

Insanity in individuals is something rare – but in groups, parties, nations and epochs, it is the rule.

As another example, the following are some insights of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), copied from Aiken's collection:

- Religion is comparable to a childhood neurosis.
- When a man has once brought himself to accept uncritically all the absurdities that religious doctrines put before him and even to overlook the contradictions between them, we need not be greatly surprised at the weakness of his intellect.

- It would be very nice if there were a God who created the world and was a benevolent providence, and if there were a moral order in the universe and an after-life; but it is a very striking fact that all this is exactly as we are bound to wish it to be.
- The psychoanalysis of individual human beings, however, teaches us with quite special insistence that the god of each of them is formed in the likeness of his father, that his personal relation to God depends on his relation to his father in the flesh and oscillates and changes along with that relation, and that at bottom God is nothing other than an exalted father.
- Religious ideas have sprung from the same need as all the other achievements of culture: from the necessity for defending itself against the crushing supremacy of nature.
- The gods retain their threefold task: they must exorcize the terrors of nature, they must reconcile men to the cruelty of fate (particularly as it is shown in death), and they must compensate them for the sufferings and privations which a civilized life in common has imposed on them.
- While the different religions wrangle with one another as to which of them is in possession of the truth, in our view the truth of religion may be altogether disregarded. Religion is an attempt to get control over the sensory world, in which we are placed, by means of the wish-world, which we have developed inside us as a result of biological and psychological necessities. But it cannot achieve its end. Its doctrines carry with them the stamp of the times in which they originated, the ignorant childhood days of the human race. Its consolations deserve no trust. Experience teaches us that the world is not a nursery... If one attempts to assign to religion its place in man's evolution, it seems not so much to be a lasting acquisition, as a parallel to the neurosis which the civilized individual must pass through on his way from childhood to maturity.
- Religion would then be the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity; like the obsessional neurosis of children... If this view is right, it is to be supposed that a turning away from religion is bound to occur with the fatal inevitability of a process of growth.
- In the long run, nothing can withstand reason and experience, and the contradiction religion offers to both is only too palpable.
- The greater the number of men to whom the treasures of knowledge become accessible, the more widespread is the falling-away from religious belief – at first only from its obsolete and objectionable trappings, but later from its fundamental postulates as well.
- When a man is freed of religion, he has a better chance to live a normal and wholesome life.

Given Freud's astounding brilliance (albeit he made many mistakes!), I wonder who need say more. Subsequently, however, others have said similar. For example, in his 1974 book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig wrote:

When one person suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity; when many people suffer from a delusion, it is called religion.

As another example, here is a quote from the 1995 book *The Corruption of Reality: A Unified Theory of Religion, Hypnosis, and Psychopathology* by John F. Schumaker:

Without cultural sanction, most or all our religious beliefs and rituals would fall into the domain of mental disturbance.

In his book (which I haven't read), Shumaker apparently concludes that it would be valuable "to restore religion to a central position in society", to solve "the problem of neurotic misery", but in a review of the book (which you can find on the internet and which was originally published in the *Journal of Psychohistory* (26) 4, Spring 1999), Jerry Piven writes [to which I've added a couple of notes in brackets]:

The book has several key faults... It is extremely repetitive. Repeated assertion alone does not strengthen a case. [A lesson that your grandfather apparently has yet to learn!]

A second problem is that the book is pervaded by discussions of dissociation, but none of this really explains the qualities of fantasy that engender conception and corruption of reality. According to Schumaker, individuals only construct illusions when they have no socially cohesive fantasies to believe in. They are thus pathological only as individuals who must construct their own illusions when social illusions are no longer satisfying. This ultimately avoids the question of what fantasies appeal to individuals and societies such that they construct them at all. Schumaker's view makes it seem that people believe whatever social fantasy is provided to alleviate anxiety.

In reality, communities have fantasies that reflect the needs and anxieties of their particular situations. The need for parental protection, to deny death, to control the environment ritually, to define the sacred, profane, pure, and impure, may derive from similar dynamics, but their content varies according to the variations of the culture. These fantasies are not interchangeable.

Finally, Schumaker contends that the solution to the problem of modern neurotic misery is to restore religion to its central place in both society and therapy. However, the search for spiritual connection is not the same as suggesting or inculcating illusions, especially religious ones. The transition from the spiritual to the religious is a line that must not be crossed by psychotherapists if it means implanting illusions. The use of deception in the clinic [and in religions and in politics!] has great potential for an abuse of power. Because we recognize that human beings need a modicum of illusion to survive is not the same as deciding for someone else what illusions they need.

The question of what illusions can actually be healthy is far more complicated than Schumaker elucidates, and he does not recognize that illusions can not only obfuscate genuine problems, but often create more suffering than they supposedly alleviate [e.g., terrorism!]. It is surprising that Schumaker himself does not realize this, since he quotes Becker to the effect that “*religion confers upon people a social license to act out madness.*” [Italics added] To state that pathology appears in times of doubt and loss of faith is obvious. To state that pathology is simply the opposite of illusion is patently false. Certainly the solution is not mass avoidance of reality; we’ve had quite enough of that already.

And note, Dear, that Piven wrote the above review before 9/11!

Thereby it appears not only that there’s collusion in all societies about what constitutes “mental illness” but also that it’s always been so. Thus, if you defy your culture’s delusions, if you deny their validity, then your society classifies you as mentally ill [just as reportedly happened for Socrates, Jesus, Muhammad, and many others (including most atheists in Western cultures, and still in many backward American communities, especially in “the Bible Belt” and in Utah)], but if you don’t defy your culture’s delusions, you’re considered mentally okay. Even better for you: if you’ll adopt your culture’s delusions, then you’re accepted as being mentally healthy! Jonathan Meades described it well:

If you believe in the existence of fairies at the bottom of the garden you are deemed fit for the bin. If you believe in parthenogenesis, ascension, transubstantiation, and all the rest of it, you are deemed fit to govern the country.

Again, as Robert Pirsig wrote:

When one person suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity; when many people suffer from delusion, it is called religion.

And I suggest “it’s always been so”, Dear, because I remember the seagulls that you always wanted to feed down by the river where we used to live.

“Huh?” responded the grandchild.

Yes, Dear, the seagulls! If you remember: sometimes in the swarm of seagulls that would come to feed, there'd be one that held its wing as if it were broken (it wouldn't tuck its wing in “properly” when it was walking – although the wing couldn't have been broken, because the seagull had flown in to feed). In some cases, there would be a seagull that was definitely different; maybe you remember one that had only one leg – or at least it hopped around on only one leg, as if it didn't have another. And in every case, what happened was what we all probably hope all humans would consider horrible: the “healthy” seagulls would attack the deformed or wounded seagull, driving it from the food.

Similar seems to occur with humans; it's called xenophobia. In the past, probably throughout the world, humans drove off those who were “different” – probably to promote survival of the group and derived from animal instinct. Surely such is the foundation of racism – made simpler for the ignorant people who, similar to “seagulls”, judge others by the color of their skin or the shape of their eyes, nose, etc. But going beyond the capabilities of seagulls (just barely!), people began driving off those whose only “defect” was that their thoughts differed from the “majority opinion”: Socrates and Jesus (ben Pandira or ben Pandera) were apparently executed for not believing in their societies' gods. Similar ignorance continued with the persecutions and executions during the Dark Ages in Europe and continues today in many parts of “modern” Islam. And even in many parts of this country, today, if you don't buy into community's religious delusions, some people classify you as mentally ill!

But beyond the damnable designation that you're mentally ill if you don't buy into your community's delusions, it seems that some people are so mentally ill that they're unable to function – period – save perhaps as religious fanatics! These are the unfortunate people whose brains seem to malfunction, such as those who have epilepsy (as “Saint” Paul probably had), those schizophrenics who hear voices and see visions (such as Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad), those egomaniacs who succumb to delusions of their own importance (such as Jesus ben Pandera, Muhammad, and Joseph Smith), and those narcissists who succumb to delusions of their own image (such as the founder of Mormonism, Sidney Rigdon, and maybe Muhammad and Zarathustra).

But whereas I'm way out of my field of knowledge, I'll just quote someone who apparently does have appropriate expertise. The following quote (from which I've omitted the author's references) is copied from Chapter 9 entitled "The Evolution of the Psyche and Society" of the on-line book by Lloyd deMause entitled *The Emotional Life of Nations*, which I encourage you to read (although some of its details will probably be quite disturbing for a youngster such as you) and which illuminates how the physical abuse of children leads to horrendous social problems, including the production of religious fanatics (such as Islamic suicide bombers).⁷

The neurobiology of "God experiences" is well understood. They are actually temporal lobe seizures, similar to the seizures of epileptics, explaining why so many mystics experienced clear epileptic seizures. These "kindling" seizures – which have been correlated with previous serious child abuse – begin in the hippocampus and spread to the amygdalan network, transforming previous painful anoxic depressive rage feelings into what Mandell calls "ecstatic joyful rage," with a disappearance of self boundaries so that the person is suddenly overcome with feelings of unity and love. The neurobiology of "God in the brain" is similar to the effects of drugs like cocaine and the hallucinogens, "inducing an acute loss of serotonergic regulation of temporal lobe limbic structures and releasing the affectual and cognitive processes characteristic of religious ecstasy and conversion." Persinger describes "the release of the brain's own opiates that can cause a narcotic high" during these God-merger experiences, producing "with a single burst in the temporal lobe, a personal conviction of truth and a sense of self-selection [that] shames any known therapy." As Otto puts it, the *mysterium tremendum* of religious ecstasy "bursts in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions and leads to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport and to ecstasy... wild and demonic... and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering." Saint Theresa tells how it felt to experience this painful ecstasy in her organ alters: "An angel pierced its spear several times through my heart, so that it penetrated to my bowels, which were extracted when the spear was withdrawn, leaving me all aflame with an immense love for God. The pain was so great that I had to groan, but the sweetness that came with this violent pain was such that I could not wish to be free of it."

And although I'm way out of my field of knowledge, I gather that such mental malfunctions can be caused by genetic problems (Moses?, "Saint" Paul?), physical trauma (such as child abuse and such as Rigdon's being dragged on his head by a horse), overwhelming emotional stress (which may explain Muhammad's behavior), fasting (in which Jesus and many other mystics engaged), and various hallucinogens (commonly used by many mystics, probably including Zarathustra).

⁷ Available at http://www.psychohistory.com/htm/el09_psychesociety.html.

And although I repeat that I'm obviously not knowledgeable about psychological problems (including my own!), I'll add a few ideas that intrigue me – and that, someday, maybe you may want to explore.

- I'm intrigued by similarities between superstitions and religions, wondering if indoctrination in superstition during childhood might easily lead to religion during adulthood. A case in point that you might want to investigate is Joseph Smith, whose parents seem to have been superstitious superstars! My own experience is with my mother, but I never knew if she "truly believed" in the existence of "the little green men" (the leprechauns, about whom she never seemed to tire of talking) or if she "truly believed" that she was in for trouble on Friday the 13th – especially if a black cat crossed her path! I similarly don't know if other superstitious people "truly believe" in various ghosts, goblins, spirits, angels, and similarly fanciful "beings", but is it much different in the principal religions of our culture? How can anyone in this age "believe" that the angel Gabriel dropped by to tell Mary that she would be impregnated by "the holy spirit", or that Gabriel later popped over to dictate rules for living to Muhammad, or that some other angel informed Joseph Smith where to find the "golden bible", and so on? Surely such supernatural nonsense wouldn't be "truly believed" by anyone who isn't a moron or who isn't insane!
- I'm also intrigued by possible relations between dreams and "the supernatural", wondering if at their base, all religions are nothing but misinterpreted dreams. That there are strong links between the "supernatural" world of dreams (or visions) and religions is obvious in most myths and certainly obvious in the Bible. I'd even go so far as to suggest the hypothesis that the essence of the Bible (and therefore of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Mormonism) is to indoctrinate people into accepting other people's dreams and visions as "true"! If you'd like to investigate the data supporting that hypothesis, Dear, you may want to start by using a "search engine" (e.g., at www.bible.gospelcom.net) to find all references in the Bible to "dreams" (77 of them!) and "visions" (71 of them!) – and then add to those the many cases where the writers apparently just omitted mentioning that the sources of various statements were dreams or "visions".
- But far more significant than those numbers is the central role that dreams and visions seem to play in developing the central themes of any religious "belief system". Thus in Judaism, central are the visions seen by Abraham (the "father" of the Jewish people) and Moses (the "savior" of the Jewish people); in Christianity, central are the visions seen by Joseph (that Mary's child was from "the Holy Spirit"), the visions of those who say that they saw Christ risen from the dead, and of course the vision of Christ seen by "Saint Paul"; in Islam, central are the visions Muhammad claimed he had of Gabriel; and as you well know, in Mormonism, central are the visions claimed by Joseph Smith.
- And if someday you do investigate all of this (for nothing more than fun of it, I hope!), then maybe you'd turn to the central question: if "revealed truth" is revealed

in dreams and visions, then what does this say about the reliability of such “truths” – and about the people who accept dreams and visions (especially someone else’s dreams and visions!) as reliable representations of reality? Such people seem to have difficulty in distinguishing different types of ideas: those ideas derived from the reality external to their minds vs. those derived from their imaginations – and from the imaginations of others. They seem to live partially in the real world and partially in a dream world. As is well known, people don’t need to be asleep to dream: it’s called “day dreaming”. People who are “highly” religious (those who “possess” what the Christians call “grace”) seem to live essentially continuously in their “dream world”; in fact, anyone who “believes” in “life after death” is just dreaming, because zero data support the reality of such a nonsensical notion.

- Undoubtedly, the behavior of some people can be significantly influenced by their dreams. If they dream that something bad will happen (calling it a “premonition”), some people will take steps to avoid conditions that were in the dream. For example, if they dreamt that they were in a plane crash, they would avoid air travel. Now of course that’s ridiculous, Dear, as ridiculous as all “astrology” and all “psychic powers”, but some people’s minds don’t work very well (remember the old and rather sad truism that half the people have below average intelligence).
- And still further, Dear, is the question about the sources of such visions, especially those seen by people when they are awake. I’ve heard it said (but never experienced it myself) that visions (or “hallucinations”) can be stimulated by fasting. In this regard, you may want to search the Bible for the many references to fasting and then the subsequently reported “visions” (e.g., by Daniel and by the clerics’ Jesus). Also, you may be as amazed as I was upon reading so many reports, available on the internet and written by recovering ex-Christians, that many people in this country became religious after becoming involved with illegal, hallucinatory drugs.
- And going further toward serious mental illnesses (or “mental malfunctioning”), I expect that the minds of people who are strongly influence by dreams, visions, and hallucinations share characteristics with those who are schizophrenic. As I’ve reviewed before (e.g., in the I chapters), it’s rather surprising that ideas about God continue, when zero data supports theories of his existence. Thus, Dear, I trust that you, in particular, have no direct personal experience that this God exists: I trust you’ve never kicked Him and then found that your foot hurts; you’ve never seen Him, smelled Him, tasted Him, or probably even heard Him. In contrast, some people do claim that they’ve heard Him – but then, they aren’t the only people to “hear voices” in their heads. That is, it seems to be quite common for the human brain to engage in some “nonlinearity” with words, resulting in what seems to be the sound of someone’s voice. If hearing such voices becomes excessive, it’s usually diagnosed as schizophrenia. To illustrate some recent ideas about schizophrenia, consider the following few paragraphs from the 1 April 2003 article in the New York Times written by Richard A. Friedman, M.D. and entitled *Self-Protection or Delusion? The Many Varieties of Paranoia*.

An intriguing clue to the origin of psychotic thinking comes from recent brain imaging studies. Dr. David Silbersweig and Dr. Jane Epstein at the New York Weill Cornell Center used PET scans to study schizophrenic patients who were having delusions and auditory hallucinations while their brains were being imaged.

The paranoid subjects showed increased activity in the amygdala, a part of the brain involved in the emotional processing of fear and danger, not only in response to threatening words, but also to neutral words. Healthy people respond like this only in threatening situations.

The implication is that the brain is responding to a nonexistent threat, at least in these paranoid schizophrenic subjects. It is like a faulty burglar alarm set off in the absence of an intruder. The paranoid patient is correctly responding to real brain activity that indicates danger, but those neural circuits have no good reason to be firing in the first place.

To make matters worse, the schizophrenic subjects also showed decreased activity in the prefrontal cortex compared with healthy people. The prefrontal cortex serves an executive function, critically evaluating signals from brain regions and shaping responses to them. So in addition to having an overactive fear circuit, these paranoid subjects have an impaired ability to judge whether their fears are rational.

Sure, paranoid people, like the rest of us, do occasionally have enemies. But if these imaging studies are replicated, the results will mean that the real enemies of paranoid people are their own brains.

The author adds the following (and I include it to again plead with you, Dear, to stay away from mind-warping illegal drugs):

What is intriguing is that drugs can produce symptoms that mimic schizophrenia, and they have yielded clues about the neurobiology of psychosis. Cocaine and amphetamines, for example, flood the brain with the neurotransmitter dopamine, producing psychosis in vulnerable people. And the cocaine-induced delusions are easy to confuse with those of schizophrenia.

Antipsychotic drugs alleviate psychosis by blocking dopamine receptors in important brain areas. In doing so, they normalize the excess dopamine activity in schizophrenia and stimulant-induced psychosis. Curiously, antipsychotic drugs, which are so effective in treating the paranoia of schizophrenia, are of limited use in delusional disorder. That suggests that the neurobiology of paranoia is diverse, just as the illnesses that produce it are.

But for those cases in which it isn't excessive, then "hearing voices" seems to be quite normal. Certainly we all seem to hear voices in our dreams, and maybe once every few months or so, I hear a voice even when I'm awake – typically sounding similar to your grandmother's (!), whereas she swears she said nothing.

Obviously, though, I'm way out of my field of expertise (if I still have one!) to be able to comment knowledgeably on such matters. For example, the following news report suggests that the word "schizophrenia" shouldn't even be used!

"Schizophrenia" should be dropped, say experts

By Patricia Reaney

Reuters News, 10 October 2006

Mental health experts called on Monday for the term schizophrenia to be dropped, saying it has no scientific validity, is imprecise and stigmatizing.

"It is a harmful concept," said Professor Marius Romme, a visiting professor of social psychiatry at the University of Central England in Birmingham.

He added that symptoms such as delusions, hearing voices, and hallucinations are not the results of the illness but may be reactions to traumatic and troubling events in life [such as child abuse].

Speaking at a news conference, Richard Bentall, a professor of clinical psychology at the University of Manchester, said the concept of schizophrenia is scientifically meaningless.

"It groups together a whole range of different problems under one label – the assumption is that all of these people with all of these different problems have the same brain disease," he added.

Schizophrenia affects about 1 percent of people in the United States and Britain. Treatments such as atypical antipsychotic drugs focus on eliminating the symptoms. But the drugs can cause side effects such as weight gain, an increased risk of diabetes, and sexual dysfunction.

Paul Hammersley of the University of Manchester who recently helped launch The Campaign for the Abolition of the Schizophrenia Label (CASL), said there is no agreement on the cause of the illness or its treatment.

CASL argues that the term schizophrenia is extremely damaging to those to whom it is applied and implies unpredictability, being dangerous, unable to cope, and someone in need of life-long treatment.

"It is like canceling someone's life," said Hammersley. "We generally believe this word has to go."

Other psychiatrists agree that schizophrenia is an unsatisfactory term that conveys bizarreness, but they are concerned that discarding the term could lead to problems classifying patients with psychosis.

“If we don’t have some way of distinguishing between patients, then those with bipolar disorder or obsessional disorder would be mixed up with those currently diagnosed as having schizophrenia and might receive treatments wholly inappropriate for them,” said Robin Murray, a professor of psychiatry at the Institute of Psychiatry in London.

He suggested replacing the term schizophrenia with the label dopamine dysregulation disorder, which he said more accurately reflects what is happening in the brain of someone who is psychotic.

But whereas, as shown by earlier quotations, even other experts obviously use the word “schizophrenia”, I’ll continue to use it here – while admitting (again) that I’m way out of my field of expertise.

In particular, suggestions that illegal, hallucinatory drugs can lead to symptoms similar to those of schizophrenia leads me to mention another reason why many people become religious – especially “born again” or “evangelical” Christians. Thus, many people after failing in business, trying to drown their troubles in alcohol, or trying to get away from their problems using hallucinatory drugs (e.g., President George W. Bush), or those who in other ways have hit “rock bottom” (in poverty, prostitution, pimping, prison, whatever) finally “find religion”. Through involvement of relatives or friends and usually a charismatic cleric, such people lunge at an offer to be “saved”, to be “born again”, to get a second chance.

Others who “lose their way” sometimes pull themselves out of the gutter by themselves (maybe using “self-help” psychology or other books) or with the help of family, friends, or psychiatrists, but the crutch of Evangelical Christianity commonly has the added “benefit” of providing an appealing delusion (even of an afterlife!) and a congregation of people who are similarly delusional, all clinging to their “savior” with all their might. Although many such losers are successful in starting a “new life”, in their zeal to convince or “evangelize” everyone in their new found “faith”, commonly they become a real pain to others. In fact, data for which I’ll show you in later X-chapters, such people can become not only a pain but really quite dangerous to others if they gain positions of power, because their “conversion” to Christianity demonstrates that they make decisions without due regard for data.

* Go to other chapters *via*

<http://zenofzero.net/>

Some Other Reasons for Religions

But I'll get to more of that in later X-chapters. For now, to end all of this "musing" about why people are religious, let me mention two other possibilities. One reason (of which I'm quite sure!) many people are religious is because they haven't read their religion's "holy book"! That is, Dear, whereas it's hard to imagine how sane people with at least average intelligence could read their "holy book" (whichever one it is!) without becoming disgusted with it and therefore their religion, I'm therefore led to the conclusion that most religious people who are sane and have at least normal intelligence haven't read their "holy book"!

Still another possible reason for religion is simply apathy. That is, I wouldn't be surprised if the majority of modern humans who profess "belief" in gods are similar to our ancient ancestors who accepted that thunder was the applause of the gods for the rain, and then turned to confront more immediate threats to their survival. Although a part of my mind applauds the pragmatism of such people, I'm bothered that their apathy provides the con-artist clerics with opportunities to prosper. It also bothers me that the apathetic are aroused only under exceptional circumstances, e.g., when their grandchildren become victims of these con artists. And maybe I feel especially sensitive to this indictment, because it could be applied to me.

ON THE RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF THE REASONS

And now, Dear, although you may conclude that the above list of possible reasons for religion is neither correct nor complete, I trust you'd at least agree that the list is quite long and that some "heavy lifting" will be needed to overcome "the fallacy of equivalence of information". So, what I'd like to do, now, is show you the "relative importance" of the many "reasons" listed above (e.g., by providing you with an estimate of the percentage of the "believers" whose belief was derived from each of the identified reasons).

But, Dear, I can't do it: I expect that the task would require 10-or-more years of study – and even if I had 10 years left to live, I'm not so interested in the result that I'd like to spend my remaining years pursuing it. If it interests you, maybe you'd like to investigate it further. If you would like to explore some of this on your own, then search on the internet (or at a good library) using terms such as "Psychology of Religion", maybe take a university course on the subject, and if it really interests you, then maybe seek your Ph.D. in the field – although I wouldn't recommend it!

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The reason for my discouraging you from a career in Psychology of Religion, Dear, is not because it's an unimportant research area, but in part because I expect you'd be able to make more important contributions in other research fields and in part because it appears to be very difficult to obtain research funding in this field – for understandable reasons. Thus, so long as essentially no politician in this country can be elected to office without displaying “subservience” to some prehistoric scientific “beliefs” (i.e., religion), you can expect that all politicians will be extremely reluctant to support funding studies of the pathology of religious beliefs! To illustrate what I mean, you might want to determine how many religious friends you're able to maintain after suggesting to them they need psychiatric help!

A Possible Research Procedure

But whereas it wouldn't be the first time that a certain grandchild ignored a certain grandfather's wise advice (☹), I'll provide you with an off-the-cuff research procedure. First, make sure you do well in your statistics courses, including a course in the statistical design of experiments – a subject that I never studied, but wish I had! Next, you'll need to define a measure of a person's “commitment” to religion, which I'll call “religiosity”. I expect that the best way to obtain such a measure is to interview a thousand or so religious people, ask them to rate their own religiosity, and then determine why they gave themselves such a rating. From such a study, perhaps you'd find that religiosity could be measured by estimates of the time that a person spends “involved” in religious activities – although obviously that criterion needs refinement.

Then the work would begin. I would suggest that, as a preliminary, you create a huge list of possible reasons why you think people are religious – and be prepared to revise your list after you've done more sampling to learn the reasons that people provide. To get you started, let me suggest a few entries for your preliminary list for why people are religious:

Addiction, Animal-training, (seeking) Answers, (out of) Arrogance, (wanting) Assurance, (feeling) Awe, (feeling) Betrayed, (desiring to) Belittle (others), (seeking) Career-advancement, (seeking) Certainty, Childhood Conditioning, (seeking) Comfort, (seeking) Company, (seeking) Control, Cowardice, Credulity, (seeking) Customers, (fearing) Death, (lost in) Dreams, Egomania, Epilepsy, (seeking) Eternal Life, (out of) Fear, Following (leaders), Foolishness, (seeking) Friends, (out of) Frustration, (desiring) Goals, (out of) Greed, (seeking) Guidance, (out of) Guilt, (to get out of the) Gutter, (seeking) Happiness, Herd instinct, Hero worship, (seeking)

Hope, Hypnosis, (unconstrained) Imagination, Ignorance, Indoctrination, (out of) Inquisitiveness, (lacking) Judgment, (seeking) Kinship, (desiring) Kindness, (seeking) Knowledge, (intellectual) Laziness, (out of) Loneliness, (searching for) Love, Megalomania, (seeking a) Mate, (searching for) Meaning, (out of) Misery, Narcissism, (fear of) Ostracism, (an) Opiate, Pack instinct, Parental pressure, (seeking) Peace, Political (purposes), (some other) Psychosis, (seeking) Purpose, (unanswered) Questions, (sheer) Rationalization, Revelation, Savagery, Schizophrenia, (seeking) Security, Selfishness, Selflessness, Socialization, (seeking) Support, (following) Tradition, (simply) Training, Tribalism, (unease caused by) Uncertainty, (to relieve) Unhappiness, (because of) Visions, (marriage or other) Vows, (out of) Weakness, (seeking) Wisdom, (living on) Wishes, Xenophobia, Yearnings (for assurance, brotherhood, comfort, development, empathy, friends, guidance, heaven, insight, justice, kindness, love...), Zonked out (on drugs).

And I know that the above is just a start, Dear, but maybe it'll give you a few ideas!

Next, after you've defined a measure for religiosity and generated what seems to be a sufficiently general list of reasons why people are religious, and after you've defined measures for each one of these reasons (have fun with that task, kid!), then you could begin sampling in earnest. Of course, you'll need to experiment to determine how large your sample should be (namely, sufficiently large so that additional data have negligible influence on your results), you'll need to define ways to discern when people are lying to you about their reasons (and how to discount such lying), and you'll need to be careful not to bias your sampling: I wouldn't be surprised if you'd be okay if you sampled, say, a thousand people in several regions of the country, for each denomination of each religion, and then do similar in other countries, for all other religions throughout the world – and I expect that you'd be wise to seek international collaborators to help you conduct your sampling in other countries!

Then there's the task of trying to make sense of the data. When you get all the information into a form of fairly reliable numbers, I'd suggest that you do an analysis of variance (ANOVA), letting a statistical program search for "principal components", i.e., sets of different combinations of your independent variables (the "reasons") that are capable of "explaining" (or accounting for) substantial portions of the dependent variable (i.e., your measure of "religiosity"). And in part to discourage you from ever undertaking this humongous research project, Dear, I'll now suggest some "obvious" answers that you'd be able to find after a decade-or-more of hard work!

Possible “Principal Components”

Thus, I suspect that a substantial portion of the variance (maybe ~80%) could be “explained” (or “typified”) by six-or-so “principal components” (or “character-types”) – at least, for religious people in the U.S. Below, I’ll outline features of each of these (imagined!) six character-types (without hinting how much of each “reason” would be weighted by your ANOVA program to describe each type). For what follows, I’ve invented a “familiar name” to identify each of these six, imagined, principal components.

1. *Ms. Cooperation.*

Probably resulting primarily from childhood indoctrination, this “principal component” (viz., Ms. Cooperation) primarily engages in religion because it provides her a channel for realization of “social consciousness” (altruistic and moral behavior, moral guidance, and community rituals, pageantry, music, art, etc.), provides security offered by an extended family (in the face of uncertainty, fears, loneliness, etc.), and satisfaction of instinctive needs (love, belonging, herd instinct, hero worship...). I wouldn’t be surprised if this principal component, alone, would account for ~30% of the total variance, and if the data are sorted, then I wouldn’t be surprised if it would account for ~40% of the variance for females and ~20% for males.

2. *Mr. Competition.*

For this “principal component”, religion provides a power structure in which he finds opportunities to increase his influence, either directly [as a “spiritual leader” (e.g., in Mormonism, as a priest), as guidance counselor or similar, in fund raising activities, etc.] or indirectly (in social contacts, political connections, sales, etc.). In contrast to the case for Ms. Cooperation, for Mr. Competition the social consequences of religion are of secondary concern: she is influenced more by the herd instinct and helping others; he, by the pack instinct and leading others (especially females). I wouldn’t be surprised if this principal component would accounts for ~20% of the total variance, and further, would account for ~30% of the variance for males and ~10% for females.

3. *The Socializer.*

This principal component finds it convenient to participate in the religion of his or her community not for “spiritual” but “earthly” reasons (the availability of a basketball court, team sports, participation in a choir, social services such as weddings and funerals, picnics, parties, dances, and outings, and so on, including mating possibilities). I wouldn’t be surprised if this principal component would account for ~10% of the total variance, similar for both males and females.

4. *The Redeemed.* After falling on hard times and seeking solace, company, and especially a new purpose in life, this principal component “finds religion” (e.g., as a “born-again Christian”). It’s common that such people become zealots in propagating their religion, which along with the message of their religion, in turn probably explains the growth of Evangelical Christianity in poor parts of Africa, Asia, and

rural America – and the growth of Islamic extremism. I wouldn't be surprised if this principal component would account for another ~10% of the total variance, probably more so for males than females.

5. *The Inquisitor.*

This principal component describes a mentally healthy (but not very bright) person who primarily finds religion to provide answers and purposes, while channeling awe, wonder, and hope. I wouldn't be surprised if this principal component would accounts for ~5% of the total variance, similar for both males and females.

6. *The Psychologically Disturbed.*

This principal component describes a range of mentally disturbed people: from those having difficulty coping (with loss, fears, hopelessness), to those seeking replacements (for lost friends, parents, lovers), out to mystics (in tune with the universe), epileptics (having seizures, seeing lights, feeling unified with the universe), and schizophrenics (emotionally unbalanced, hearing voices, seeing visions). I wouldn't be surprised if this principal component would accounts for ~5% of the total variance, similar for both males and females.

From all of which, Dear, I trust you see how challenging it would be to determine the reasons for religiosity! I'll list some other "lessons to be learned" in the following series of

Some "Post-Research" Notes.

1. *"Cooking the Books"*

From the above "research results", I trust you see, Dear, how valuable it is to take a long series of boring engineering-laboratory courses – where you can gain proficiency in cooking-up results without ever doing the experiments! [And no, Dear, I'm not saying that I did that – but I am saying that many of the labs, especially the "banging and bending" labs, were extremely boring!]

2. *"You Can Prove Anything with Statistics"*

From the "research results", perhaps you can also see how hidden premisses can easily distort analyses. For example, from the same data and using the same statistical software, someone else might conclude that the most important "principal component", describing ~70% of the variance, was:

The Truly Religious Person. This principal component finds that religion provides happiness, love, family support, helpful loving friends, good company, security, support, a feeling of belonging, peace of mind, comfort, serenity, social consciousness, moral guidance, and a caring community, assurance, knowledge, wisdom, purpose, goals, meaning to life, hope, eternal life...

Based on my own observations (e.g., of your mother, her mother, and mine), certainly I wouldn't be surprised by such a result – leading one to wonder how could analyses of the same data using identical analysis techniques lead to such different results?

When you encounter such cases, Dear, you need to dig into details. For example, in the case outlined above, you'd need to dig into details of definitions of categories, such as “happiness”, “wisdom”, and so on. Thus, if a subject stated that one reason for religiosity was the “happiness” that religion provided, then one data analyzer might have accepted that reason “at face value” – while another analyzer (accounting for Shaw's “**The happiness of credulity is a cheap and dangerous quality**”) might have attributed the reason not to “happiness” but to “credulity”.

Similarly, if the subject stated that one of the reasons was gaining wisdom, then one analyzer might take that reason at face value – while another analyzer (accounting for the Hungarian proverb “**The believer is happy; the doubter is wise**”) might have identified the stated reason as evidence of foolishness, realizing that people are happy when they think they're making progress toward their goals – even if, in reality, they're not making progress and even for cases in which it's impossible to measure progress (e.g., the “well being of your immortal soul”). All of which doesn't prove but supports the claim: “**You can prove anything with statistics.**”

3. Culturally Dependent Reasons for Religiosity

If you initiated such a research program in conjunction with social scientists from around the world, Dear, then I'm confident that your colleagues from other cultures would vehemently disagree with your (imagined) conclusions about the reasons for religiosity: the “principal components” outlined above might be defensible for “mainstream Christians” (and maybe even Mormons) in the U.S., but not, for example, for Muslims in Afghanistan. Thus, I'm sure your colleagues would be able to convincingly demonstrate that reasons for religiosity depend on both culture and the religion. In particular, I expect that child abuses, atrocious educational programs (more appropriately described as “religious indoctrination programs”), concomitant ignorance, violations of basic human rights of women, patriarchy, tribalism, and oppressive government – all common in most Muslim countries – are the determining factors why most Muslims are religious and thereby continue in an Islamic version of “the Dark Ages”.

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4. *Some Recent Results*

A recent article that statistically examines why people are religious is available online at <http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2009/2009-17.html> . It was published in *The Journal of Religion and Society*, Vol. 11 (2009). The author is Tomas James Rees; the article is entitled “Is Personal Insecurity a Cause of Cross-National Differences in the Intensity of Religious Belief?” The author answers that question as follows:

This analysis shows that, across a broad multinational panel, those countries with shorter life expectancy, higher infant mortality, higher violent crime, more corruption, higher abortion rates, and less peace also tend to have higher average levels of personal religiosity, as measured by the frequency of prayer. Furthermore, these indicators of personal insecurity also correlate with income inequality, allowing inequality to serve as a widely available proxy for personal insecurity as it pertains to religiosity. Using this proxy, personal insecurity is shown to be at least as important in the determination of national average religiosity as the factors that are conventionally considered important, such as wealth, urbanization, and governmental regulation of religion (and indeed personal insecurity appears to be the most important determinant)...

In conclusion, the current analysis ties together and explains two apparent paradoxes. First, the observation that modernization, in terms of average material wealth, appears linked to secularization in some countries but not others. The key to this paradox is that it is not simply average wealth, but also the distribution of wealth and the degree to which wealth is used to improve average personal security, which in large part determines religiosity. Second, the observation that religion, although generally believed to have a pro-socializing effect on the individual level, is associated on the macro level with societal ill health. This is most likely because personal religiosity is in part a response to adverse social environments, but that aggregate religiosity does not significantly ameliorate them.

Rees’ paper also provides a useful bibliography of recent, similar studies. Some criticisms of Rees’ statistical analyses (and his responses) are at <http://www.richarddawkins.net/forum/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=86522&p=2122307#p2122307> .

IN CONCLUSION

From all of which, Dear, I trust you agree that there are many possible reasons why people are religious. Yet, I expect that the main reason that most people are religious can be described with the title I used for an earlier chapter (**Ii**), namely, “Indoctrination in Ignorance”.

Children are indoctrinated in clerical ignorance mostly by their parents, who were indoctrinated by their parents, and so on, always with continuous reinforcement by clerics (for their own profit) and in collusion with political leaders (to maintain their power). In particular, indoctrination in the Abrahamic religions is effective, because essentially everyone seeks to gain as much as possible at lowest-possible cost. In the Abrahamic religions, foolish people buy into clerical con games, because the clerics pitch an incredible offer (eternal life in paradise!) at next to no cost: just state that you believe that the clerical ignorance being pitched is “true” – and, oh, of course, there’s the minor matter of tithes.

Such a “sales pitch” by clerical con artists seems to be especially effective for children and for women and men too cowardly to face reality. They prefer to live in their delusions than face reality’s unknowns and insecurities. That their delusions are fictional fabrications doesn’t bother them – provided that no one reminds them that they’re living in delusions. In the past, during the Dark Ages, Christians killed those who told them they were living in a delusion, and still today, fundamentalist Muslims will try to do similar.

Meanwhile, there are also many reasons why many people aren’t religious – and some of us are even anti-religious. Some of us rebelled at the idiocies of all religions, some rebelled at the waste of mental and material wealth on perpetuating ignorance, some rebelled at the injustices perpetrated by religions, some rebelled at the social disharmony (including wars) promoted by religions, and of course there are still other reasons. But I don’t want to go any further into such “negative reasons”; if I did, I might even end up describing some especially deviant old fool who became angry at the damages religion did to his grandchildren...

Instead, let me mention some “positive reasons” why some people aren’t religious: they decided to think for themselves, they developed a healthy attitude toward their own existence, they steeled themselves to face reality’s unknowns and insecurities, they ate healthful food, they got a reasonable amount of exercise... Which reminds me...