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Framing God: Toward a Cognitive Account of Religious Rhetoric

By

Adam Lewis

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Professional Writing in the Department of English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State
University

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2011

College of Humanities & Social Sciences
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Certificate of Approval

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PREFACE

The teenage boy beside me is bawling. I am 16 and sitting among the pews of perhaps 500 people in the large church where the play called *Heaven's Gates and Hell's Flames* is being acted out.

Jesus is standing front and center with a blazing spotlight from behind giving him a halo. The scene has enough power to send a good portion of the audience into sobs audible halfway across the sanctuary. A suited man is on his knees before Jesus. The man begs, clinching the white robes of the Son of God.

“But Jesus, I was a good man. I was always faithful to my wife. I supported my kids, gave them everything they ever needed. I believed in God.”

Releasing his grip on the flowing white cloth, the man falls prostrate before the unmoving, haloed Jesus. A booming voice reverberates throughout the church.

“I never knew you. Depart from me, ye that work iniquity.”

A woman lets out a wail from somewhere in the back of the building. On stage, white angels step quickly forward and grab the man. He protests wildly as the heavenly hostesses drag him to the glowing red gate at the opposite side of the stage, tossing the man forward. The angels exit stage left. Now quiet, the man awkwardly rises from the floor and looks around. Sinister music begins to play and the lighting swiftly changes to bathe the stage in red. Thunder booms from speakers and laughter emerges from the red gate.

The suited man looks quickly in a panic from side to side when he sees Satan step toward him. He tries to run away but two red demons are there to catch him by the armpits. As the man is being dragged, kicking and screaming down into the depths of hell, Satan steps to the center of the stage in a red bodysuit, black cape, and horns. Instead of the traditional pitchfork, a microphone serves as the diabolical instrument of choice. He slowly draws it toward his mouth and when the words come they are so loud that the crying boy next to me shudders.

“Another one who thought he could get into heaven by simply being good!” Satan roars as he looks around the congregation, holding the microphone with clawed fingers.

Beelzebub tilts his head back and lets roll an evil laughter, stopping abruptly to glare at the audience in a sweeping motion. The devil’s other arm now comes out from under his black cape with an extended finger that matches his head in the motion, pointing at everyone in the audience in a slow arc.

“Hell is full of good people!” he belts out just before running with laughter off stage and into the red gate.

Red stage lighting recedes and some ambient white light now glows from the front of the church. An overweight man dressed in a blue suit steps forward holding a Bible in one hand and a microphone in the other. He starts to give the altar call:

“Ladies and gentlemen, you don’t want to be like that man...” His words turn into a jumble as I become aware of a new raucous—the one among the congregation. A howling lady in the back is the only distinguishable individual among the din of sobs and snuffs.

Ushers race to the back to assist the howling lady forward to the altar. With her arms and legs at such crazy angles and one foot dragging, she looks like a disjointed Barbie doll dressed in

a black dress as the ushers bring her to kneel near the preacher. The preacher catches my eye again, and I am able to understand what he is saying.

“...accept Jesus into your heart this night and you can be with him in paradise. The thief on the cross...”

The words drown out as I glance to my side and see the teenage boy beside me still crying. His down turned head splashes tears onto his forearms.

The sanctuary lights turn on to full force and in every direction I look there are expressions of anguish plastered on wet red faces. I turn back to the preacher and notice that he’s thrusting the bible forward so hard that I’m amazed it doesn’t slip from his grip and fly through the air. The worn, leather bound book bends heavily with each motion. With sweat beads on his forehead, his words pound through the air.

“Everyone here knows whether or not they are right with the Lord. Come forward and the blood of the Lamb will wash your heart as white as snow.”

An usher comes by and offers the teenager beside me an outstretched hand. The boy nearly jumps out of his seat and strides to the altar. The usher starts to follow but realizes it is not necessary. He turns to survey the crop of other potential converts.¹

¹ See (Ratliff, 2003) for the documentary “Hell House” chronicling a very similar play.

Why is religion such a persuasive force in human lives and culture? How can mythic narratives bring teenagers to tears and adults to hysterics? Why is the rhetoric surrounding an invisible, undetectable, and for all practical purposes imaginary being such a feature of human thought? These questions have vexed me for years now.

As a child and young adult I was thoroughly entrenched in fundamentalist evangelical Christian culture. From doing my fourth grade science project “Creation vs. Evolution” which consisted of merely buying pre-fabricated exhibits from “creation scientists” and plastering them to a piece of cardboard (it nevertheless won for my school) to memorizing Bible verses on a weekly basis for youth group as a teenager, the supernatural has been part of my life since my first memories. There was my baptism in the local river at age 12 where it was made official that I was “born again.” There were the times that worshippers would speak in tongues when they were “indwelt by the spirit” as the preacher sermonized about fire and brimstone during weeklong revivals. I was homeschooled for the seventh grade school year and given the hobbled versions of science and history that fundamentalists consider acceptable in a godly education.

To say these things isn’t to say that I had an unhappy upbringing. On the contrary, I had a wonderful childhood and time as a young adult. What these things do testify to is that the religiously supernatural has undergirded my thoughts the entire time I’ve had on earth.

It is curious that I now find myself as an unbeliever in the God that I was so intimate with as a child and teenager—at least in that God so conceived. It is blatant apostasy that I now believe that manifestations of the “Holy Ghost” are better explained as psychological states than as evidence of the divine. It is also curious that my quest for God has left me in the position of dissecting it by way of a radical reinterpretation drawing upon rhetoric, cognitive science, and philosophy. Gods, the minds that think about them, and the rhetoric used in their service will be the focus of this thesis.

INTRODUCTION

Stated simply, I think that there is a strong case to be made that religion, in many of its popular, conservative, and interventionist forms, is the way in which humans try to understand the world in social terms. In other words, religion represents humanity's attempt to shape a profoundly socially unresponsive world into one that is socially responsive.

To bring this out from under its shield of opacity, suppose that there is a tornado in your hometown where nearly all buildings are destroyed except for the church. Undoubtedly, this would be proclaimed a miracle. Saying something is a miracle is to presuppose that the event was intentional. Indeed, it presupposes a host of modes of thought, but the most important one in this discussion is that it is viewed as a social-relational event. The tornado's path is understood to be overseen or guided by a supernatural agent. Scientifically understood, the tornado was a mindless meteorological event that happened to spare the church building. But that explanation lacks social meaning, and it is in this explanatory gap that religion can set up shop.

To illustrate this principle, this thesis will focus on disasters. The Upper Big Branch mine disaster of 2010 in West Virginia will serve as a case study. The rhetoric surrounding the 2010 Haitian and 2011 Japanese earthquakes will also be used. There will also be a foray into some philosophical arguments for God that will reveal the cognitive underpinnings of certain types of religion.

The rhetoric that exploits this I will call the "social-causal frame" since not only is the social component central, but causation is as well. A slight distinction needs to be made here to

avoid any difficulties. Certainly instances construed as “acts of God” are not always imagined to be directly caused by a god. But as I will show is the case of the UBB mine disaster, they are often imagined to be at least *overseen* or *under the potential control* of a god and, importantly, they are imagined to be within a larger causal chain of events that are socially relevant to both deity and believer. This makes it possible to entertain thoughts such as “What does this mean?” or “What was God trying to tell me?” in the contexts of disasters or any other event a believer finds relevant.

I am aware of the large philosophical (e.g. Sosa & Tooley, 1993) as well as psychological (e.g. Gopnik & Schulz, 2007) literature on the topic of causation. However, a straightforward definition will suffice for the purposes of this thesis and I will restrict its usage mostly to the social realm. I define social causation as the (real or imagined) intervention of agency on a chain of events. Even more simply, social causation is causation that has at least two interacting agents. For instance, if you ask a child to fetch a Coke from the refrigerator and she does, that was a socially caused event. Likewise, any event believed to be caused by a responsive agent I am referring to as “socially caused.” I can’t go yell at a tree to fall down and expect it to happen because it is *not* socially responsive. In that instance even though I would be a social agent, I did not do anything social because I did not interact with another agent. Moreover, in any instance where there is a naturalistic explanation of causation, I take that as the default correct scheme to be contrasted with social-causal scheme posited by interventionist religion.

However, to go any further without defining precisely what I mean by religion would be folly. Although religion has always proved to be an excruciatingly difficult item to define (see Pals, 1996, pp. 11-12 for discussion), when I use the word religion without qualification, I mean supernatural belief systems that posit gods that act in the world. That is, the type of religion that is about a god that divinely intervenes. To state this in a more technical sense, I define religion to be about socially salient and socially responsive supernatural agency. The *socially salient* aspect

sets gods apart from ghosts and other spirits. While those entities are socially salient to a degree (especially in Eastern religions), they do not command the attention that gods do (Tremelin, 2006, p. 122). The *socially responsive* aspect is crucial because without that distinction the definition would work for many forms of magic. Magic may be socially salient (think voodoo) but the *magic itself* isn't a responsive, relational being like a god.

This definition is about the type of religion that I will mainly be taking issue with in this thesis. I am certainly not claiming that religious beliefs that do not meet these criteria shouldn't count as "real" religion but it is usually not going to be the type that I am interested in. For many in our contemporary world culture, religion has morphed into something solely about morality rather than about the supernatural—especially in some highly secular Western European nations (Zuckerman, 2008). The relationship between religion and morality will be given its own upcoming section. Non-theistic religion, such as certain schools of belief within Buddhism and Taoism, represent non-majority positions (Slone, 2004, pp. 68-84; Smith, 1995, p. 205) within religions that are conservatively estimated to number in the hundreds of millions in total (Religions of the world: Numbers of adherents, 2000). Non-theistic types of religious beliefs will not be of concern in the context of this thesis since they do not deal with intervening deities.

Furthermore, religious rhetoric is obviously metaphoric at times, but it is also meant very literally by many of its believers. "God" in the instance of the people who think they have been miraculously healed is not a personified figure of speech—He (or She) is a real causal agent. Sometimes this presents a fuzzy situation where it may be meant to be metaphorical by a speaker but understood literally by a later hearer (Barber & Barber, 2004, p. 97). For the purposes of this thesis I am interested in the instances where it is meant literally.

There is another distinction to be made here: I am not construing religious people as harboring beliefs about supernatural causation *necessarily to the exclusion* of naturalistic and

scientific explanations. Oftentimes these beliefs are held simultaneously (Bering, 2008) as with the common case of theistic evolution—the belief that science is right about biology but that a god guided the process. Another case would be where people seek medical treatment and would not deny the role of medical professionals and science in their recovery but still attribute causal power to a god in a kind of meta-causation, as “authoring” the events, or as the “grand architect” of the entire situation.

Another preliminary that must be made here is one of stance and one of argument. While I take a stance of methodological agnosticism,² the very nature of my argument hinges on the fact that claims of divine intervention are incoherent and contradictory. Indeed, my arguments would appear weak, almost banal if it were taken at face value that claims about supernatural intervention were plausible. This is not the place, nor is it my purpose to argue against the existence of God or gods. But of necessity I must make a short argument against the notion of divine intervention in the world. I do not have any pretensions that this argument is definitive. What is more, a number of the points I present here are based on the work of Victor Stenger (2007).

Concerning divine intervention, what is known is always simply claimed *on behalf* of a God or gods. Consider the following instance that was relayed to me by a close family member about a neighbor. An elderly gentleman was walking on an icy church parking lot. He lost his balance and fell, injuring his leg and causing enough pain to warrant a doctor’s visit. An x-ray revealed a simple hair-line fracture in the lower leg. Days later and with a cast on at a church

² Methodological agnosticism is a fairly widespread perspective taken by scholars of religion. This position studies religion as a human phenomenon without necessary recourse to supernatural explanations. Questions about the truth of religious claims are usually ignored in favor of a theoretical accounting of the behaviors and beliefs using naturalistic models. I am perhaps stepping over that line somewhat by taking the stance that divine intervention is probably nonexistent and is at best incoherent. However, God in all deistic forms (in the Jeffersonian sense of a non-interacting ultimate being) and in more liberal theologies survive the subtraction of a divine hand from the world perfectly unscathed.

service, the prayer ritual “anointing with oil”³ was performed on the man. A week or so later, the pain stopped and a check-up visit to the doctor revealed a healed bone. This was relayed to me as proof positive that “sometimes we have to count on the heavenly doctor.”

While I hate to appear the Scrooge to the happiness this apparent “miracle” brought the elderly gentleman (in fact, I simply smiled and shook my head affirmatively when the story was related to me), such a proof of divine intervention is risible—and yet it is highly representative of the claims of intervention offered by the average believer. I will summarize the many reasons why this healed bone does not constitute an instance of divine intervention.

1. *It is ad hoc attribution.* It does not differ at all from a completely naturalistic chain of events. Bones break and they hurt. Then they stop hurting when they heal. That the bone healed faster than average is the only unusual thing that can even be said about the event (Bone Healing, 2010). Even in that case, it is not absolutely extraordinary that simple fractures heal faster than average sometimes, even for geriatric patients. Like any biological process, healing occurs within probabilistic limits, with most taking the average time (by definition) and some taking longer and some shorter.

2. *It utilizes confirmation bias.* This “hit” is counted but the numerous other cases of unanswered prayers—“misses”—where illnesses that healed within perfectly average time scales or got worse are not counted.

³ This is a fairly common practice in fundamentalist churches in southern West Virginia (as I know from personal experience). As such, it is likely to be widespread in many places where fundamentalist Christianity is common. The ritual is fairly simple and in the many instances I have seen it conducted the ill or injured person requests the ritual, then deacons, elders, or preachers, (anyone of general authority within the church) gather around, place a drop of oil on their thumb or finger and touch the afflicted individual’s forehead. Then audible prayer commences. It is drawn from scriptures such as James 5:14 “Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.” (NIV)

3. *It utilizes selection bias.* Claims like this are a dime a dozen from just about every deity in existence and from many forms of magic as well. Why should we believe Jesus healed a leg in West Virginia if there is a structurally identical claim with a mutually exclusive deity in India?

4. *It is a perfect illustration of the problem of evil.* Why did a supposedly omnipotent and good God help a relatively wealthy man living in a wealthy nation who also had health care with a relatively trifling injury while He didn't do anything about the child (just to look at one) who starved to death in Africa in the meantime?

To use a much larger example that I will develop further in a later chapter, during the Civil War the Confederate states claimed God was on their side while the Union did the same. Clearly one side was wrong and in retrospect one might be (as some are) tempted to say that Yahweh was a blue coat. But what about the claims made on behalf of Allah? Or of Poseidon in ancient Greece? Or of the localized deities of remote tribes? While it is *in principle* possible for one of these series of claims to be correct (that is, the claim that Yahweh was on the side of the Union during the Civil War was valid while the claim that He was on the side of the Confederacy was invalid), or that all claims to have God on one's side have validity (even in mutual contradiction?), all of this seems to me to be highly unlikely. When the entire data set of all the myriad deities and religious doctrines ever appealed to by people of vastly different world views and religious inclinations is imagined, it seems the most likely and parsimonious explanation is that while these claims are thoroughly incoherent as explanations of reality, they do provide strong evidence for shared psychological propensities.

Furthermore, gods are viewed as active agents in the world within nearly all religions in their popular form (Tremelin, 2006), just as the broken leg example illustrates. To entertain here for a moment that in principle it is possible for one particular interventionist religion's claims

about divine action to be correct, this would entail a coherent pattern of God's interventions in the world. The immediate rejoinder here offered by interventionist theologians is that God's ways are inscrutable but His intentional causes are nevertheless lurking behind the scenes, perhaps awaiting revelation in heaven. But therein is the rub—if there was a coherent pattern of intervention on earth by a deity, it would necessarily be knowable on earth. As it is, events interpreted as the intentional actions of a deity are as easily and better explained under naturalistic models.

Indeed, if one is able to have a personal relationship with God as most evangelicals Christians posit, practice, and believe, God's actions that they claim in their life should be at least minimally discernable and defy a baseline naturalistic interpretation of the same life events. One could even put this to comparison between the life of say a fundamentalist Christian and a Buddhist. What would be the result? Nothing. It is known that people of all faiths and no faith have good, bad, and mediocre lives and experience a range of good, bad, and mediocre events in their lives. Put bluntly, if a god is supposed to be really active in the world, then this is knowable on an empirical and observational level and is also falsifiable by the same standards.⁴ Over a century ago (and certainly to be taken with a grain of salt), Francis Galton (1872) wrote a paper in this vein that looked at the life spans of people who were prayed for within Christendom. There was no discernable pattern.

The immediate reply at this point is to say that one "cannot put God in a test tube" as the popular phrase goes. But this is not playing by any other game than what is, in fact, posited by a traditional, conservative, interventionist theology. God, by these very interventionist standards, is supposed to work in the world and these claims of intervention, if they really are more than superfluous post hoc attributions in service of a social heuristic, should be clear and coherent and

⁴ Is this scientism? Not unless subjecting empirical claims to empirical standards of evidence is scientism.

distinguishable from baseline naturalistic events. This is not the case. To be clear here, this is a restricted argument limited to interventionist theologies and many other theologies would be largely untouched by it. But interventionist theology is a very popular, if not the most popular, form of theological belief (see Stark, 2008 for corrolary data).

How does rhetoric figure into this? When we try to persuade others that there is a better or more correct way to think about the world and its workings (something interventionist religion is most surely about), rhetoric is involved. And one of the primary functions of religious rhetoric is to frame events socially. In this regard, it is preeminently a rhetorical enterprise.

This framing often takes the form of narratives. From the way that creation myths give a sense of social placement to their believers to the way that the stories of religious prophets, saints, and characters are often used as reference points (e.g. “Job lost everything and still loved God”), these narratives are often a core part of what it means to be religious. But this phenomenon is certainly not limited to religious thinking:

Much of our thinking about our lives is in narrative form, most usually loosely linked vignettes of incidents, real or imagined, such that experience is organized into comprehensible episodes. Such accounts make sense of events, and tend to do so with emotional power in a way that gives meaning to life. Allowing insight into the complexities of thought, emotion, and behavior *involved in human interaction* [italics added], the use of the narrative mode [...] allows the individual to grasp a longer past and to conceive the future and the social environment in a more intricate and variegated fashion than would otherwise be possible. It is not merely a matter of the sequential story form: narrative thought permits understanding of the complex webs of information provided by the *interactions* [italics added] between particular individuals. (Hinde, 1999, p. 101)

It becomes quite clear on reflection that narrative pervades many aspects of our everyday thinking. A core aspect that I am going to emphasize is that these narratives are most often social in nature. Indeed, if one takes Burke’s pentad as authoritative on the issue, most narratives of

how the world operates will contain the elements act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose (Burke, 1969, p. xv). Following this, it is my contention that the default way humans think about the world contains agents and when no agent is present, an intuitive need to fill in the agent slot of the narrative is still present. To get an empirical handle on this, I will recount a fascinating study conducted by cognitive psychologists Jesse Bering and Becky Parker. I will quote Bering's entire summary of it from his book *The God Instinct* (2011) since I cannot do it better justice and it needs a detailed summary:

In these initial experiments, which have come to be known [...] as the "Princess Alice studies," we invited a group of three- to nine-year-old children into our lab and told them they were about to play a fun guessing game. It was a simple game in which each child was tested individually. The child was asked to go to the corner of the room and to cover his or her eyes before coming back and guessing which of two large boxes contained a hidden ball. A short time was allowed for the decision to be made but, importantly, during that time the children were allowed to change their mind at any time by moving their hand to the other box. The final answer on each of four trials was reflected simply by where the child's hand was when the experimenter said, "Time's up!" Children who guessed right won a sticker prize.

In reality, the game was a little more complicated than this. There were secretly two balls, one in each box, and we had decided in advance whether the children were going to get it "right" or "wrong" on each of the four guessing trials. At the conclusion of each trial, the child was shown the contents of only one of the boxes. The other box remained closed. For example, for "wrong" guesses, only the unselected box was opened, and the child was told to look inside ("Aw, too bad. The ball was in the other box this time. See?"). Children who had been randomly assigned to the control condition were told that they had been successful on a random two of the four trials. Children assigned to the experimental condition received some additional information before starting the game. These children were told that there was a friendly magic princess in the room, "Princess Alice," who had made herself invisible. We showed them a picture of Princess Alice hanging against the door inside the room (an image that looked remarkably like Barbie), and we gave them the following information: "Princess Alice really likes you, and she's

going to help you play this game. She's going to tell you, somehow, when you pick the *wrong* box." We repeated this information right before each of four trials, in case the children had forgotten.

For every child in the study, whether assigned to the standard control condition ("No Princess Alice") or to the experimental condition ("Princess Alice"), we engineered the room such that a spontaneous and unexpected event would occur just as the child placed a hand in one of the boxes. For example, in one case, the picture of Princess Alice came crashing to the floor as soon as the child made a decision, and in another case a table lamp flickered on and off. ([...] We just arranged for an undergraduate student to lift a magnet on the other side of the door to make the picture fall, and we hid a remote control for the table lamp surreptitiously in the experimenter's pocket.) The predictions were clear: if the children in the experimental condition interpreted the picture falling as a sign from Princess Alice that they had chosen the wrong box, they would move their hand to the other box.

What we found was rather surprising, even to us. Only the oldest children, the seven- to nine-year-olds, from the experimental (Princess Alice) condition, moved their hands to the other box in response to the unexpected events. By contrast, their same aged peers from the control condition failed to move their hands. This finding told us that the explicit *concept* of a specific supernatural agent—likely acquired from and reinforced by cultural sources—is needed for people to see communicative messages in natural events. In other words, children, at least, don't automatically infer meaning in natural events without first being primed somehow with the idea of an identifiable supernatural agent such as Princess Alice (or God, one's dead mother, or perhaps a member of Doreen Virtue's variegated flock of angels). (Bering, 2011, pp. 93-95)

Bering goes on to describe the equally interesting findings in regard to the way the different age groups reacted in the experiment and how this relates to cognitive development, but for our purposes here I shall focus on the oldest children (the ones that thought Princess Alice was communicating with them) since they performed most like adults who claim there is divine intervention in the world. One can see the connection here to how adults with an interventionist theology view disasters and everyday events as the symbolic communicative acts of gods.

Indeed, nearly 4 out of 10 Americans think that the 2011 Japanese earthquake was a sign from God (Public Religion Research, 2011).

The Princess Alice experiment provides an excellent example of adding an agent when there is no clear one to form a coherent narrative. The control group of children did not spontaneously invent an agent to explain the poltergeist-like events. Yet the experimental group utilized the proffered concept of Princess Alice to fill out the narrative with an agent. In producing an explanation of the event in a post-experiment interview, one child said:

“It’s another way of her [after attributing the picture falling to Princess Alice] not speaking, so she doesn’t have to talk to tell me that it’s wrong.” (Bering & Parker, 2006, p. 262)

Of course, the above quote could only count as the most meager of narratives but it contains all of the elements of Burke’s pentad. The picture falling is the act. The lab room is the scene. Princess Alice is the agent. With an agent believed to be present, agency is intuitively assumed even though no process is known of how something immaterial can interact with the material (this seeming gaping hole will be covered later in the chapter concerning the cosmological argument for God). And finally, the purpose of this act by Princess Alice is perceived by the child as communicating to her that the guess is wrong.

In these contexts, *kairos* becomes one of the most important facets of interventionist religious rhetoric. Whether it is a child who is forced to guess to earn a prize or a preacher trying to make sense out of a disaster for his congregation, taking advantage of the salience of such events to persuade listeners of the validity of the message about invisible supernatural agents can be paramount. Yet this is not the only way that rhetoric affects the reception of religious ideas. As with the Princess Alice experiment, the children not primed with the idea of a supernatural agent did not spontaneously invent one. This leaves open the idea that since humans are social

creatures, social explanations will be favored regardless of what a more reflective analysis might reveal. It is here that the very way in which events are linguistically framed come into play.

The effect of framing on cognition has been studied fairly extensively. To recount one classic study—the “Asian Disease Problem”—subjects were asked the following:

Imagine that the U.S. is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs to combat the disease have been proposed. Assume that the exact scientific estimate of the consequences of the programs are as follows:

If Program A is adopted, 200 people will be saved. [72% of respondents chose this option.]

If Program B is adopted, there is 1/3 probability that 600 people will be saved, and 2/3 probability that no people will be saved. [28% chose this option.] (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981, p. 453)

Of course, Program A and Program B are identical and merely framed in different manners. Most people chose A because it was framed in the manner of stating the amount of people who will live while B had somewhat more of a pessimistic connotation (but not denotation) because it is implicit that 400 people will perish. As this example shows, the same *actuality of an event*, if framed in rhetorically different manners, can produce dramatic differences in perception.

To look back at the fractured leg, it is easy to see how social framing can produce dramatic differences in the way the entire chain of events is perceived. Suppose that this same event had occurred to the same individual in the same community structure but just without the religious element. Suppose he is an agnostic who is going to a community building instead of a church and it is to a book club meeting that he is walking to when he falls. What would be different?

First, the broken leg is not directly socially responsive. In this regard it is much like the tree that fails to obey a request to fall down. Yes, the man might petition family, neighbors, and doctors to help in the healing process. But he would not simply ask the air to help heal him in a supernatural manner. Only a deity could do such a thing and play such a role.

It seems to me that it is in this contrast where the prominently rhetorical character of religious thought and belief stands out. A fully naturalistic account lacks *even the possibility* of persuading superhuman aid to help in the situation. But real-life circumstances within the religious community allowed the man to be in a rhetorical relation to the personified grand scheme of things. It allowed his moral standing to directly count toward his well-being,⁵ in effect producing an ethos-powered argument in hope of persuading God. Blatant “sinners” usually don’t expect much help from God, but those “washed in the blood of the Lamb” usually believe that their moral standing will help persuade God to answer their prayers. Indeed, James 5:16 reads: “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (KJV). This is will be covered in much greater depth in the chapter “Theism and Its Discontents.”

This prominent rhetorical character can be seen in the fact that I was even told this story to begin with. Converging data and theory from both biology (Cheney & Seyfarth, 2007, pp. 120-145) and more culture-centered studies (Mesoudi, Whiten, & Dunbar, 2006) show there is systematic bias in humans toward attending to, processing, and remembering social data over non-social data. If non-social data can be transformed into social data by processing with the social-causal frame that religion provides, this would give religious rhetoric an advantage in the realm of communication—especially when contrasted against naturalistic accounts.

⁵ Although moral standing counts in a naturalistic scheme as well since a bad neighbor, father, or patient is likely to receive less help from the community, this scheme is much more diffuse than in a supernatural religious scheme since gods have direct access to everyone’s moral standing through omniscience. Even though human agents care about others’ moral standing, they also lack the supposed power that gods wield.

Referred to variously as the Machiavellian intelligence/ social brain hypothesis (Mesoudi, Whiten, & Dunbar, 2006) or simply the social intelligence hypothesis (Cheney & Seyfarth, 2007), this posits that

All group-living animals confront a multitude of social problems, and that intelligence in primates—and perhaps many other species—must have evolved at least in part because natural selection has favored individuals who are skilled at solving these problems. (Cheney & Seyfarth, 2007, p. 122)

Although this hypothesis does have detractors (e.g. Wolpert, 2007), it is very well accepted (Whiten, 1999). To test the hypothesis, (Mesoudi, Whiten, & Dunbar, 2006) conducted experiments that tested for recall and transmission of gossip, social, individual non-social, and physical data. Social and gossip data were transmitted consistently with higher fidelity and recall.

Experiment 1 found evidence that gossip-like social information is transmitted with significantly greater accuracy and in greater quantity than non-social information. Experiment 2 replicated this finding using material equivalent in narrative coherence, demonstrating that coherence was not responsible for the superior recall of the gossip. Experiment 2 also found that information concerning social interactions that would not be described as gossip was transmitted with an accuracy and in a quantity not significantly different from the gossip itself. That is, the gossip-like content of infidelity, deception and pregnancy was relatively unimportant; what mattered for superior transmission was that there were a number of third party social agents interacting with one another. (Mesoudi, Whiten, & Dunbar, 2006, p. 417)

Taking this as a background feature of human cognition and communication, it makes sense that if physical data are transformed into social data via interventionist religious rhetoric, a substantial rhetorical advantage can be gained.

To briefly illustrate this with the example of the 2010 Haitian earthquake, it can be said that, from a scientific standpoint, the quake itself is a perfectly asocial event. The tectonic plates didn't ask anyone before they released their energy. They didn't care that the quake would kill

hundreds of thousands of people. Indeed, they were socially unresponsive, being mindless natural forces and matter. That the effects of the quake were socially relevant is after the fact. Yet many found a direct religious significance in the event, and the rhetoric they relayed transformed the physical understanding of tectonic plates into a social understanding that posited the intentional or potentially intentional actions of a deity.

This encapsulates the primary argument of this thesis. While science is a social activity conducted by social beings, its descriptions of reality deny the social responsiveness of inanimate matter. Interventionist religion, on the other hand, does not since it posits that matter can be under the influence and control of supernatural agents. Placing asocial events within a social-causal frame is a powerful and central feature of religious rhetoric. By looking closely at this rhetoric, some important features of human cognition can be teased out.

BUILDING GODS WITH MINDS AND RHETORIC

Empirical reality often clashes with our scientifically uninformed intuitions. These intuitions would lead us to believe that the Earth is stationary while that burning yellow light in the sky is the celestial body that moves. Though inaccurate, these intuitions provide enough of a working mental model to suit our needs. One could pass through life believing in a geocentric solar system and function properly, as generations upon generations of human beings did. Many of our intuitions and modes of perception were not cobbled together by evolution as tools for discerning truth, but rather for building approximations of reality that were useful to our ancestors. A number of skewed ways of thinking (from a scientific perspective) have come down to us and are well known to psychologists. A few prominent examples are confirmation bias, self-serving bias, in-group bias, group consensus bias, and personification bias (Newberg & Waldman, 2006, p. 253-257). These biases are often the intuitive "default" in our thinking and take conscious effort to suppress. However, the fact that these biases can produce false conclusions does not entail that any thinking influenced by them must lead to false conclusions. Take, for example, group consensus bias. That a group of experts believe something can be a good reason to believe that it is probably true, though with a different group a consensus would not provide a good reason to believe it at all. The point here is simply that these intuitive biases are legion in our thinking.

Among these built-in proclivities for thinking in certain ways are religious and supernaturalist biases. Just as human beings are biologically "prewired" to learn language from their social environment, thinking in terms of the supernatural may also be inborn. With language the specific semantic content is not inborn, but the general proclivities are there.

Perhaps learning religious concepts comes naturally in a similar way. This isn't to say that people are born with any innate "knowledge of God" or *sensus divinitatis*, but simply that human beings are generally susceptible to thinking in terms of religious conceptualizations (which are almost always in abundant supply in the surrounding culture, particularly in its rhetoric). Developmental psychology has shown that children are often intuitive creationists (Kelemen, 2004, p. 295-296). Indeed, cognitive scientist Jesse Bering tells us that, "By her own accounts, even Helen Keller, who was deaf and blind from nineteen months of age, spontaneously pondered, 'Who made the sky, the sea, everything?' prior to being taught how to communicate" (Bering, 2009). These examples show why empirically vacuous claims about gods, souls, afterlives, and so on are rhetorically effective: they fit well with people's prescientific intuitions. In this chapter I will explore how these intuitions shape beliefs about gods as supernatural agents, drawing on examples from the Koran.

Explaining our surroundings and the situations that we experience is a primary human drive. We create order out of chaotic environments and complex phenomena through language, constructing narratives and myths to situate ourselves within the larger sphere of the world. One of the prime reasons for these myths and narratives is to establish one's relationship to other human beings, to events, and even to oneself. This is not just a creative process, where narratives and myths are plucked from the imagination without constraint, but a process where our senses and psychology interplay and interact to mould the stories that we tell and the beliefs that we hold. And as with any way of understanding the world, we often feel that there are better or more correct kinds of explanation which compete with other explanations. Thus explicative and explanatory narratives and myths—and their connected belief systems—often use rhetoric to sway opinion in their favor.

Where do God and religion fit into this process? The pantheon of deities and their central role in various cultures have always played an explanatory role in our mythic narratives. The

Koran (mirroring many other holy books) says: "It was God who created the heavens and the earth" (14:32). But why do so many people find this type of rhetoric persuasive? The answer is that it is natural for human beings to think in terms of agents acting upon the world, and gods are agents (Whitehouse, 2004, p. 30).

Our physical and mental world is full of agents, and our minds are constantly inferring their actions. If the neighbor's lawn has been mown, even if it was not directly witnessed, we automatically infer that either she has cut the grass or hired another human being to do so. The inference of agency is ubiquitous as a mental tool for *Homo sapiens*. Interpreting a strange creaking sound in the night as an intruder's foot upon a squeaky board—not simple temperature contraction—utilizes what Justin Barrett has dubbed our mind's Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (HADD) (Barrett, 2000, p. 31-32; Tremlin, 2006, p. 77-78). As a mental tool the inference to agency is nearly a default cognitive perception (Boyer, 2001, p. 145). Indeed, as Todd Tremlin puts it, "Because agents are the most relevant things in the environment, evolution has tuned the brain to quickly spot them, or to suspect their presence based on signs and traces" (Tremlin, 2006, p. 76). Why this is so makes perfect biological sense. The cost of false positives—such as thinking that a coiled rope is a snake at first glance—is very low, resulting in a mere shock. But the result of a false negative—thinking that a snake is a rope—can cost you everything in biological terms (Guthrie, 1993, p. 50-56).

Extending this principle into the social realm, it is easy to see why we are always looking out for agents. If a husband comes home smelling like flowers, his odor may have been caused by a walk through a blooming field, or it may be the perfume of another woman that rubbed off on him. To the wife, the nonagent explanation is of little consequence, but the explanation positing another agent carries grave consequences. Thus, even where no obvious agent is involved, inferring that an agent was responsible is a seductively powerful explanatory scheme, as it should be. For, as in the lawn mowing example above, these types of explanations often turn

out to be correct. If an event or circumstance needs to be explained, positing an agent often does the job nicely.

However, this tactic becomes trickier when explaining events that no natural agent—human or animal—is capable of producing. In these situations human beings often keep the inference of agency, but modify the type of agent involved. Supernatural agents are thus inferred from situations where no natural agent could possibly provide a plausible explanation. Consequently, these situations often invoke questions of a religious nature. Sacred texts, such as the Koran and the Bible, often imbue phenomena that can be understood entirely naturalistically (in our contemporary scientific age) with supernatural agency. The resulting rhetoric is deeply ethos-empowered: the suite of existential questions present in all human cultures—Where did we come from? How did we get here?—are often answered by positing an overarching supernatural agent: the Deity. With a supernaturalistic explanatory scheme in place, explaining causation in nature and causation in large-scale social trends by reference to this deity-agent invokes a deeply ethos-driven rhetorical effect. Who can match the credibility of the Creator of the universe? To get to the root of this, certain aspects of human psychology must be unpacked.

Within human culture the ubiquity of—and massive variation in—religion and supernatural belief are defining characteristics of our species. Critiques which claim that supernatural beliefs are as absurd as obvious fictions like Santa Clause or fairies are caricatures that misunderstand the issue. Such superficial critiques fail to critically evaluate the role that supernatural beliefs play, why the human mind is so apt to hold them, and why they are persistent even in the face of naturalistic explanations. As psychologists Justin Barrett and David F. Bjorklund write,

Belief in gods requires no special parts of the brain. Belief in gods requires no special mystical experiences, though it may be aided by such experiences. Belief in gods requires no coercion or brainwashing or special persuasive techniques. Rather, belief in

gods arises because of the natural functioning of completely normal mental tools working in common natural and social contexts. (2004, p. 21)

As previously mentioned, human beings believe in gods in part because gods act as agents, and agents—at least natural ones—are indisputably part of the world. And, as Barrett points out, quite ordinary cognitive functioning can cause human beings to hold extraordinary beliefs. But although agents are a normal part of our physical and mental life, and gods are agents, gods are still rather distinctive from natural agents. As Barrett and many other cognitive scientists of religion point out, gods fall into a class of concepts that are "minimally counterintuitive."

Minimally counterintuitive (MCI) concepts typically violate one (or a few) intuitive assumptions about a conceptual category. Barrett's illustration is clarifying:

Create an MCI the following way. First, take an ordinary concept, such as 'tree,' 'shoe,' or 'dog,' that meets all of the naturally occurring assumptions of our categorizers and describers. Then *violate* one of the assumptions. For instance, as a bounded physical object, a tree activates the nonreflective beliefs governing physical objects, including being visible. So make the tree invisible (otherwise a perfectly good tree), and you have an MCI. (Barrett, 2004, p. 22)

Distinguishing gods as minimally counterintuitive is an important step in understanding the intuitive (and by extension rhetorical) pull that they have on the human mind. For instance, if I were to tell a group of people that there is a tree on campus that could sing songs, turn neon purple on command, and fly like a helicopter, most would be incredulous and my rhetoric relaying the story would fail. However, if I relayed a minimally counterintuitive tree concept, like a tree that could hear one's whispers on moonlit nights and grant wishes, it would be more likely to convince. (Notice the social component of this more believable concept.) By contrast, flatly counterintuitive ideas are not useful in for perceptual schemata. For instance, a god that eats spaghetti with a water hose, drinks dirt, and exists only on every third Thursday won't last long in the minds of human beings. That god would be too outlandish; in the jargon of cognitive

science of religion, it wouldn't achieve a cognitive optimum (see e.g. Tremlin, 2006; Whitehouse, 2004).

On the other side of the coin, a god that is a normal person except for having the ability to make magic rocks won't last as an idea either—that would be too mundane. There are many minimally counterintuitive supernatural concepts that are not gods—such as ghosts, ancestral spirits, and angels—but they differ from gods in very important respects. For one, as Todd Tremlin explains, gods have more social relevance:

Ghosts, witches, and similar representations go so far as to activate our social mind systems, including the mental mechanisms of social exchange. As a result, these kinds of representations hold a special salience the world over. Usually, though, they are treated as agents that need to be dealt with as one deals with other humans. What these concepts ultimately lack is the counterintuitive property that makes gods the focus of serious religious commitment: full access strategic information, including people's moral qualities. Only god concepts capitalize on the mind's most powerful cognitive systems *and* have the counterintuitive properties capable of generating serious personal and social commitment. (Tremlin, 2006, p. 122)

As Tremlin notes, the most cognitively optimal concepts for gods are the ones that utilize an anthropomorphic template and violate it in a strategic way, such as having omniscient access to social information.

This access to strategic information brings us to another key concept about how gods are constituted in the human mind—theory of mind. This useful perceptual schema evolved as a specialization of our hypersocial species because it has particular survival value (Tremlin, 2006, p. 80). For its intuitive characteristics it is dubbed the Theory of Mind Mechanism (ToMM) by Tremlin (2006, p. 80). Further discussions about the theory of mind's role in religious cognition can be found in Atran (2002), Barrett (2004), and Boyer (2001). Whether hypothesizing what is going on in the mind of a sexually competing peer, or in the mind of a potentially deadly enemy

or animal, an adept and engaged ToMM is exceedingly important. When we recognize that we are interacting with another agent,

Our knowledge of agents links physical causality to *mental* causality. Agents, we intuitively assume, have minds. They are things that think. Agents have feelings, intentions, and an array of private beliefs and desires. Their behaviors, we also assume, are motivated by these beliefs and desires. (Tremelin, 2006, p. 80)

Being able to anticipate the potential actions of other agents because we know that they possess a mind—a mind that can feel hunger, pain, lust, or love and act on those desires—is one of the vital aspects of human social life. Indeed, one of the primary impairments of autistic children is that they lack the ability to theorize about other minds (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985, p. 37). Since the ToMM is primarily a social navigation and survival tool (ToMM is only useful in a world with other minds), and the human social world is of central importance to human beings, the primary type of mind that we attribute to agents is the one that we understand the best—our own. This may be why gods have minds with human characteristics.

Carrying this forward, Tremelin argues that all god concepts are the result of suspecting the presence of an agent and then theorizing about what is going on in its disembodied mind:

First, of all the objects in the environment, agents matter most. The connection?—*gods are agents*. Second, humans understand the world, and particularly agents, in light of minds. The connection?—*gods have minds*. These facts are exceedingly trivial, but they are also exceedingly explicative. They tell us exactly what kinds of things gods are and how we think about them. (2006, p. 86)

If this theoretical framework is correct, it also explains the variation that we see among the complete pantheon of deities. It has long been noted in religious studies that the deities of a culture often reflect the values and characteristics of that culture. For instance, the sometimes brutal depictions of Yahweh in the Old Testament of the Bible reflect the cultural landscape of

the time, and the uncompromising yet merciful depictions of Allah in the Koran mirror the mind of Mohammed and his culture. Indeed, as Paul Froese and Christopher Bader put it:

The idea that one's God reflects something essential about oneself is a popular notion among religionists and nonreligionists alike. The *Book of Genesis* is clear on the matter: 'And God said, Let us make man in our image after our likeness' (Genesis 1:26). Social scientists and psychologists tend to reverse this causal order and argue that individuals anthropomorphize the idea of the supernatural to reflect cultural values and desirable human traits. (2007, p. 465)

So supernatural beliefs—including beliefs about gods—are formed out of concepts and perceptions that arise in the natural human mind. Although this does not preclude the existence of the supernatural, it provides a naturalistic framework where we can study and explain supernatural beliefs, and tie them into religious rhetoric present in both holy texts and in the culture at large.

Supernatural concepts (including those about various deities) are usually not the abstract metaphors or philosophical yearnings found in some intellectual schools of thought. Rather, they are practical, explanatory, and reified systems of perception that carry rhetorical weight. Impersonal, noninteracting deities are within the realm of philosophical arguments; but practical and acting deities can have actionable rhetoric attached to them. As Tremplin notes:

It's telling, too, that in religions that teach the existence of some ultimate power or impersonal divinity—the forces of Tao, Brahman, and Buddha-nature, the creator gods of many African tribes and of early American deists—such ideas are almost completely ignored in favor of more personal or practical deities. (2006, p. 123)

Indeed, the simple American invocation "God bless" is quite illuminating on this point.

Unpacked, the statement implores a supernatural agent to interrupt the causal structure of reality on behalf of a person or group. Unless God is an active agent in the world, His prominence is drastically reduced, and the rhetoric attached to Him is lame. As Pascal Boyer writes: "First,

religious concepts are represented by people mostly when there is a *need* for them. That is, some salient event has happened that can be explained in terms of the god's actions" (2001, p. 138). Thus, one of the primary functions of the rhetoric of supernatural agency in the Koran and other holy texts is to point to prominent events. When the salient event has been proffered, the explanation that it was the result of an acting agent fits perfectly with the profile of human cognitive patterns. Given that humans are already prone to see events as the products of agency, the perceived understanding that a listener gains will be especially rhetorically effective if the supernatural agent is imbued with a theory of mind closely related to the listener's culture.

Natural events, scientifically understood, are impersonal and lack intentions. But events like earthquakes deeply and personally affect human beings. The mode of thought that understands such events as the intentional actions of an agent with a human-like mind will be advantageous, for it imparts a semblance of social understanding of the events. The agents offered as explanations are particularly memorable minimally counterintuitive god concepts with relevant strategic information. This makes a superbly efficacious recipe for religion because it is both biologically primed and culturally transferable. It is no wonder that 19th- and early 20th-century secularists' predictions that religion would wane as scientific knowledge increased have largely failed to materialize (Stark, 1999).

Science cannot explain events in the socially salient and relational manner that religion does. While it can and does explain cause-and-effect relationships between human beings and the natural environment (such as climate change), it cannot offer *intentional* or agency-driven accounts of nature. This is one of the reasons why some philosophers of science have remarked that scientific thinking does not come naturally in explaining nature in terms of natural cause and effect. In *A Grammar of Motives* Kenneth Burke's pentad of dramatism contains the elements act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. But scientific explanations often leave out major elements— notably mind and intent—relating to agent, agency, and purpose. In other words, there is no Zeus

intentionally lobbing lightning bolts but only electrical charges in the clouds. So a naturalistic construal of lightning may be less psychologically satisfying because there is no relational agent, and hence no drama or social meaning. Thus scientifically explicative rhetoric lacks many of the primary ingredients that humans find relevant. Since the human mind evolved in a manner that biases explanations of salient events to include some form of supernatural agency, religious rhetoric invoking supernatural agency will always enjoy an advantage (at least to some individuals) over scientific explanations.

Salient events are used heavily in the rhetoric and narrative of the Koran. One illustrative passage reads:

It is He who has made the earth a resting-place for you and traced out routes upon it that you may find your way; who sends down water from the sky in due measure and thereby resurrects a dead land [...]; who has created all living things in pairs and made for you ships and beasts on which you ride, so that, as you mount upon their backs, you may recall the goodness of your Lord. (43:10-11)

In the preindustrial society of the Middle East where Islam was born, seasonal changes held an important place in the minds of inhabitants. Indeed, the natural climate cycle was an intimate part of their lives. The climate-related events noted in the Koranic passage above could easily be interpreted as the intentional actions of an agent. The passage conforms to the conceptual framework sketched out previously. There is a salient event (the seasonal changes that alter the biosphere) that needs to be explained. A nonnatural agent must be inferred since the scope of the action outweighs a natural agent's abilities. This supernatural agent is minimally counterintuitive and has access to strategically important social information, making it a god. And with the culture supplying the theory of mind, this god becomes an intentional and relational being with localized characteristics. As Theodore Jennings points out, "explicative use of god-language is important not only because it is so widespread, but also because it answers to a basic human need:

the need for pattern, order, regularity" (1985, p. 152). The rhetoric of supernatural agency generates conceptual coherence out of the world very effectively.

The presence of these rhetorically effective cognitive patterns in human beings is fairly well established, though they may not be perfectly understood or described. However, human beings and their ways of thinking vary greatly, and not everyone perceives the world in supernatural ways, or in the locally orthodox religious manner. Today we find scientific naturalists and unorthodox religious dissenters, and it seems that even in the days of the Koran there were skeptics that needed convincing of its supernatural claims.

As the rhetoric of the sacred text reveals, agency is not universally inferred by everyone for all situations. Addressing unbelievers, the Koran asks: "Do they not reflect on the camels, and how they were created? The heaven, how it was raised on high? The mountains, how they were set down? The earth, how it was made flat? (88:17) This rhetoric implies that only an agent—Allah—can account for the origins of the things in the world. Indeed, this rhetoric seeks to legitimize a specific theological message through an explanation of events. Jennings notes that "Explicative god-language is the use of god-language to identify a structure which explains an event or to explain or 'legitimate' structure" (1985, p. 159). The structure that this Koranic passage seeks to explain is that of the world. It is working off of the tacit assumption—an intuitive explanation in the mind of the reader—that an agent is required. Crafting its questions in a manner that begs the inference of agency (The camels—how were they created?) is a rhetorical device to persuade the reader of the legitimacy of the Koran's answer. Needless to say, the agent in this scenario is Allah, and He has all of the previously unpacked characteristics of god concepts that are intuitively compelling to the human mind. If this rhetoric isn't enough to convince the audience of the rightness of the Islamic conceptualization of the world, the passage goes on to describe that it is aimed at those who "turn their backs and disbelieve," and that if they do not submit to its teachings, "God will inflict on them the supreme chastisement" (88:25-6).

Thus Allah is shown to have access to strategic social information (one's beliefs), making Him not only a very salient agent in the world, but one whose rhetoric is best heeded.

Interpreting world events or the world's condition as the intended result of a supernatural agent is a hallmark of Islamic theology. As Taner Edis writes:

There is plenty of popular superstition and a tendency to see natural events in terms of divine reward and punishment. For example, after earthquakes in Muslim lands, which result in much more devastation than in technologically advanced countries, some popular preachers will invariably declare that the quake was a divine punishment brought on by Western consumer ways, or maybe they allowed too many women to uncover themselves. (2007, p. 85)

Indeed, the religious teachers that make such pronouncements are utilizing God as an explanatory device, and these pronouncements flow directly from a literal reading of the Koran. Such pronouncements pepper the text: "It is He who ordains life and death, and He who alternates the night with the day. Can you not understand?" (23:80). While many believers interpret these passages in a metaphorical way, and many religious scholars would scoff at interpreting earthquakes as divine will, Islamic and contemporary American culture make it obvious that there are many people who do not see God as a metaphor. These believers see Him as an active supernatural agent with real causative powers in the world, powers that are not sublime or ambiguous, but matter of fact in the manner of God caused B because of A. Thus the rhetoric that taps into this point of view will undoubtedly be persuasive to many.

The rhetoric of supernatural agency is so effective not only because it works in a top-down trajectory, but from an eruptive bottom-up one as well. The Koranic passages that try to convince us of the explanatory power of God in observed events and situations can be generalized (with some caveats) to similar forms of rhetoric in other sacred texts and in religious discourse. It works in a top-down manner by tapping into cognitive pathways and modes of thinking that are

nearly ubiquitous among human beings. It is utilized in an eruptive bottom-up fashion by its articulators because they have the same general cognitive architecture as every other human being. The detection or inference of agency, the application of theory of mind to this agent or agents, and the minimally counterintuitive characteristics of god concepts makes for a deeply compelling and deeply convincing recipe for religion. That this rhetoric has been enshrined as sacred text in the Koran and other holy books follows from these observations. Indeed, the rhetoric argues for and articulates the very way that many people see and view the world, its events, and their interrelationships. As Jennings writes: "The use of god-language to display the antecedent conditions of causality as a mode of explication [...] can be seen as a specific form of such a logo-logical or meta-explicative use of god-language" (159). God and the pantheon of other postulated deities serve a deeply human need—giving structure and meaning to the world as we humans have evolved to perceive it. This is why the rhetoric of supernatural agency is—and probably always will be—a powerful part of human communication.

As Burke writes, "rhetoric is the art of *persuasion*, and religious cosmogonies are designed, in the last analysis, as exceptionally thoroughgoing modes of persuasion" (Burke, 1970, p. v). But that still leaves us with the question: "*Why* is religion persuasive"? Burke continues: "Theological doctrine is a body of spoken or written *words*. Whatever else it may be, and wholly regardless of whether it be true or false, theology is preeminently *verbal*" (1970, p. vi). This chapter set out to explore the relationship between rhetoric and religion with an emphasis that diverges somewhat from Burke's. Instead of focusing on the verbal rhetoric of religion (although that certainly remains a vital component), I have argued that the conceptual rhetoric of various religious ideas has *a priori* persuasiveness. The more specific question is thus: "Why are gods and other components of religion highly credible to human beings even though they are objectively unverified?" The answer is that the intuitions and perceptions that human beings experience when sensing and conceiving of our environment, as well as the cultural rhetoric of

religion, predispose us to believe in such things. These two aspects of religious concepts combine to make them particularly persuasive. Religious concepts are conceptually intuitive and rhetorically appealing because of preexisting cognitive biases in the evolved human mind.

DETECTING SOCIAL COGNITION AT WORK IN LAY RELIGIOUS RHETORIC AND
PHILOSOPHICAL ARGUMENTS FOR THEISM

Lay Rhetoric

“Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said...” (Job 38:1 KJV)

On April 5, 2010 I was sitting on the back porch of my grandparents’ house when an ambulance sped down the road. This in and of itself was nothing to take note of. However, a moment later another followed. A minute later there were three more. By this time my grandparents and I were left dumbfounded staring at the country road as more went by. About ten ambulances had now sped past. A few moments later the phone started ringing and we were alerted as to why. Upper Big Branch mine, located a mere six miles away in the small community of Montcoal, had experienced a methane explosion that trapped 31 miners underground. Twenty-nine of the trapped would later die, and the event turned out to be the worst American mining disaster in 40 years (Upper Big Branch Mine disaster, 2010). An uncle had been scheduled to work the same doomed shift that day, but had called in sick. Two of my cousins unaware of his decision to stay home had been hysterical until they learned he was safe.

As the tragedy unfolded and agonizing setbacks delayed the rescue effort, the religious response was quick and organized. Prayer vigils were conducted. Prayer chains were phoned through lists alerting the faithful to pray for the safety of the miners.⁶

The following Wednesday, I attended prayer service with my grandfather. The subject on everyone's mind was the disaster. Carefully listening to the discourse offered by the deacon leading the service and then by the preacher in his sermon, I was struck by a nearly religious revelation. A propositional claim can be falsified and many religious claims (at least in traditional denominations) are propositions. Some examples of these propositions would be: "Jesus is the Son of God"⁷ or "The Bible is the Word of God." Causal beliefs, on the other hand, cannot be easily falsified in the manner that propositions can. Witness the endless rationalizations tirelessly manufactured in order to save political causal beliefs about economic policy. Liberals can rationalize failures of the welfare system as bad performance of bureaucracy and conservatives can do the same with failures of capitalism by blaming out of control greed (Sloman, 2005, p. 106). These beliefs are very much akin to interventionist religious beliefs about the world since they are causal in nature and can accommodate a seemingly endless supply of contradictory evidence. This comes into stark relief when looking at examples such as the

⁶ These are further instances where prayer is viewed as causally efficacious, not meditative or contemplative.

⁷ Witness the small tempest over the documentary *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* in the evangelical world. The documentary purported to find the tomb of Jesus and some of his family members thereby possibly disproving any type of literal resurrection (*The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, 2007). While the archaeological scholarship and conclusions of the documentary were shaky at best, the way in which they were hotly denounced and denied by conservative believers and shrugged off by liberal theologians as inconsequential to their beliefs is a great focusing point for demonstrating how a large portion of believers view at least a large proportion of their beliefs as falsifiable in principle while others do not. Indeed, even Saint Paul wrote: "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Cor. 15:14, NIV). The point I am making is that while there are propositional beliefs aplenty in interventionist religion, their core is etiological in nature and hence closed to simple falsification (See Sloman, 2005, p. 106). In the chapter "Theism and Its Discontents" I also make the case that a major misunderstanding of religious beliefs by atheists is that they hold them to be mostly propositional in nature.

mining disaster. This instance is incompatible with the proposition of the existence of a loving god with active control of the world and yet here are worshippers giving praise to a being that is supposed to have the power and foresight and hypothetically could have forestalled such a disaster.⁸

The rhetoric employed that night at the church service was extremely interesting and is quite common for interventionist theologies:

“We don’t know why such things happen, but Lord God Almighty still sits on His throne.”

“The Lord is still in control.”

“We may not be able to know why, but God sure had a reason.”

It was after hearing these phrases that the insight hit me. What is important in this type of religious belief is not that the proposition “God exists” or “God helped us” is affirmed (although it is), but rather the cognitive representation *as if a social agent is in control* is utilized. In other words, placing the grand scheme of things into the social-causal frame is the purpose of such rhetoric.

The truth of the propositional statement that an omnibenevolent, omnipotent, and intervening god exists is hard pressed by the existence of disaster and evil (even acknowledging

⁸ Of course, many, if not most, do not see a contradiction between suffering and the existence of a loving god and this is *precisely* my point. Seeing an omnibenevolent god with active causal powers in the world yields an incoherent etiological picture of reality. It would be akin to me watching a heinous car accident that I could have easily prevented and then helping the victims. Many even believe that disasters are “signs” from God which is an even more unsavory interpretation. 38% of Americans think the recent Japanese quake is just such a sign (Public Religion Research, 2011). With a belief that disasters are “signs” from on high, a more apt analogy would be a shooter wounding some victims and then being praised for helping the EMTs in the aftermath. The best way to explain these incoherent beliefs about divine intervention is to account for them not with maltheism or even necessarily atheism (or with the convolutions of more traditional interventionist theology on this topic). Rather, a parsimonious explanation is that the beliefs are a result of misapplied social interpretations of impersonal reality. The general human reliance on interpreting events within the social-causal frame constrains thinking to favor even incoherent *social* beliefs over the more accurate description of impersonal, uncaring natural forces.

the massive amount of apologetics countering this) but shoehorning senseless disaster into a social interpretive scheme makes tragedy easier to handle, both cognitively and emotionally. The proposition that God is omnibenevolent is thus non-foundational and subservient to the causal utility that the belief in God provides.

There is a tension here between what is claimed by believers on behalf of God's causal intervention (certainly these are propositions in the mode of "God did X") and what the argument that I am making is claiming about these claims being largely causal in nature. Certainly beliefs about God are often rendered in terms of propositions, but my claim is that these are made in the service of the social-causal scheme. In other words, the propositions are formulated based on how people think the causation is occurring. The propositional belief "God acts in the world" is formulated because people view causation through the lens of social cognition and God is the stand-in agent to complete the social-causal frame. Much like the children who thought the picture fell because of Princess Alice have their belief in Princess Alice validated with their interpretation of the event (not because Princess Alice actually exists), belief in an intervening God is often reinforced because of the seductive way explanations can be formulated with the addition of an agent, regardless of the agent's rational plausibility.

These propositions about divine intervention are incoherent beyond personal narrative. In the realm of a full-fledged account of causality in the world, the glut of claims of divine intervention do not pass muster. My central aim here is to account for this by showing that claims of divine intervention are the over-application of the social-causal scheme from the domain of human social events where it correctly applies to where it is inapplicable—mindless, natural events.⁹ In philosophical parlance this could be termed a category error.¹⁰

⁹ Of course, this is not to the exclusion of this principle to other areas. A prominent example that does not follow the simple illustration of interpreting nature as socially responsive is the oft made claim of

Illustrating this principle with uncommon clarity is Hannah Whitall Smith, a 19th century theologian, feminist, and author. Her popular bestseller *The Christian's Secret to a Happy Life*, described as a classic among Christian devotional titles (Henry, 1984, p. xiv), could be compared in importance among popular Christian books to Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* which has sold 30 million copies (List of best-selling books, 2011). Smith writes:

What is needed then, is to see God in everything, and to receive everything directly from His hands, with no intervention of second causes; and it is to just this that we must be brought before we can know an abiding experience of entire abandonment and perfect trust. (Smith, 1875/1952, p. 149)

Smith's use of a social-causal frame here is superbly clear. Per her advice, a Christian is to see that God is the ultimate cause of everything, even in the bad cases— such as mining disasters. Perhaps without even knowing of Smith's writings, the preacher and church members framed the mine disaster in this manner as the natural outgrowth of applying social-cognitive thinking to what others would consider asocial, mindless events. The trust and comfort they drew from such a framing is present in Smith's advice as well. Until one views everything within the social-causal frame, one will be denied the “abiding experience of entire abandonment and perfect trust.” Indeed, the feeling of trust in the way things work out is nonsensical unless there is a measure of social responsiveness and intentionality to all events—the very thing that God is imagined to contribute.

“God's hand” in human history. Obviously there are multitudinous minds and agents shaping history—a very social phenomena. Yet all these complexities are often collapsed into the Will of one agent—God.

¹⁰ “A category error occurs when someone acts as though some object had properties which it does not or cannot have. The reason why it cannot have those properties is because the properties belong to objects in some other category or class. For example, [Chomsky's famous sentence]: ‘Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.’ The preceding sentence commits at least two category errors. One is the attribution of the property of color (green) to something immaterial (ideas). This is an example of a property (color) which ‘ideas’ cannot have. A second is the attribution of a property of speed/manner (furiously) to an action (sleep). This is an example of a specific property which sleep does not have, even though sleep can have other, similar properties—like soundly or quickly.” (Category Error, 2011)

Taking a very close look into the rhetoric surrounding the horrific tragedy of the mining disaster can bring to light several important aspects of religious cognition. As Frank D'Angelo writes in *A Conceptual Theory of Rhetoric*:

Although the mind is inaccessible to observation, we can infer something about the underlying thought processes that produce discourse from observing and analyzing particular instances of discourse. Conversely, we can infer something about conceptual patterns of discourse from our knowledge of these underlying thought processes.
(D'Angelo, 1975, p. 28)

D'Angelo is saying that one can get a glimpse into the mental workings of human beings by closely looking at patterns of language use. It is just such an approach that will be utilized in this analysis. First, this section will look at the rhetorical devices of diminution/amplification and reduction regarding agency. Second, it will look at how the injection of teleology is also a major feature of interventionist religious rhetoric and how this can offer a glimpse into its cognitive underpinnings.

Diminution, Amplification, and Reduction of Agency

At the prayer service I attended following the tragedy, the preacher began the sermon with these words:

“This isn't my message, it's the Lord's!”

Even such a short statement is loaded with manipulation of agency. Here is a preacher speaking a sermon that he, at the very least, has had to write using his own physical fingers and his own physical brain even if God was truly involved in the process. His first speech act is to diminish

his own agency in the situation and amplify God's. While this has many rhetorical effects, the most prominent is the ethos gained in the shift of agency. If it is a preacher's words, those words and arguments and claims can be possibly discounted but if they are in line with the Almighty Creator of the universe, one sure had better listen. This is a clear case of rhetorical diminution of agency.

This is also seen in cases such as when athletes ranging from football stars to NASCAR drivers give some type of thanks or credit to God after winning an event. Perhaps it serves as a device to sideline the appearance of boasting, but it seems that there is much more to it. An accomplishment can seem like a gift in complex situations as it is natural for humans to feel grateful for gifts. The agent God serves as a nice stand-in since one cannot thank the complex chain of events that led to one's victory. By looking at even seemingly mundane utterances such as these one can infer, as D'Angelo argued, many of the cognitive processes underlying them.

In many cases, in addition to diminution, appealing to the divine is a reductive rhetorical device. The complex variables and agencies of all 22 football players on the field and numerous coaches off and all the drivers in the race and their pit crews and mechanical equipment make up a very complex, if nearly chaotic interactive scheme. When the player or driver thanks Heaven at the end, everything is reduced to the will of a single agent—God. This is also at play in the instances such as with hurricane Katrina and Pat Robertson where the complex meteorological variables of a storm are reduced to the morally-motivated actions of a deity. So, not only are these examples of placing events into the social-causal frame, these rhetorical strategies also reduce complexities into a simpler and social type of data. Recall from the introduction that research has shown that social data is preferentially transferred and attended to by humans (Mesoudi, Whiten, & Dunbar, 2006). The existence of such rhetoric of thanking God for winning a sporting event is evidence of this bias in action since it takes a complex series of events that has both social and non-social data and condenses it into a single piece of social data—"God's will."

Injecting Teleology

Claiming that all events “happen for a reason” also factors into this equation and performs the rhetorical role of injecting teleology into otherwise purposeless events. Indeed, the preacher said that night of the disaster: “The workers who were spared were spared possibly in order that they may be saved.” Wherefore springs this urge to answer the question “Why did this happen?” in such terms? Because social agents do things for reasons. Social agents have purpose to their actions. This reasoning is a natural feature, nearly default, to human cognition. The gas build-up is believed to have purpose—some purpose, even if one cannot know it—because it is interpreted using the social-causal frame where no events occur without some social reason behind them.

One aspect of this type of rhetoric is that it necessarily avoids any meaninglessness. It would be a category error to even conceive of the mindless, intention-less natural processes of gas buildup that led to the disaster as having the beliefs of the trapped miners in mind. When put like that, it rightly seems absurd. But, when using a social heuristic to interpret events this is a natural conclusion to draw. The purpose of the rhetoric such as found in the sermon is to point out salient events (*kairos*), frame them as socially caused, amplify divine agency, and set up any other connected points to be made such as, in the case of this particular sermon—the altar call that dwelt on the fact that humans cannot know when they might die and that only God knows. The teleology of the situation was amplified to the point that God used the disaster to remind those sitting in the pews of their mortal nature and that this particular night might be the last time that they are “convicted of their sins” and might be saved.

Philosophic Rhetoric

The cognitive-scientific account of religion and gods allows us to see that a primary characteristic of the supernatural is that it can function as a framework of causation. Specifically, interventionist religious rhetoric places salient, important, and complex events within a social-causal framework that minimizes non-teleological and non-intentional explanations. Additionally, it allows for a social understanding of non-socially responsive events (Boyer, 2004). For instance, the recent earthquake in Japan has already been labeled by some preachers as a sign from God. One pastor even said: “This disaster may be warnings from God against the Japanese people’s atheism and materialism” (Hyun-jung, 2011). The tectonic plates that caused the disaster have no intentions or minds nor could they be coherently said to be under the control of some agent that does (with so many earthquakes in so many locations per year, the distribution is just as should be expected under naturalistic models). Yet this pastor’s rhetoric adds the additional element to the event allowing for it to be understood as the social actions of a god.

A prominent commonplace, already mentioned, that demonstrates this principle is “Everything happens for a reason.” The meaning of the phrase, a truism for many, is that all events may be interpreted as intentional. In most cases this means that causation is the result of the direct intentional acts or indirect consent of God or a god. Taking into account the entire data set leads to some very objectionable and nonsensical conclusions such as with the disaster mentioned above. Believers may find it difficult to understand the exact intentions behind such events, but they do not find it hard to posit that there *are intentions there* nevertheless. This can be explained in another way by saying that people’s intuitions about salient events (as opposed to mundane events like a cup falling off a table) are part of a schema that assumes intentionality firstly and most strongly. Only by consciously over-riding this intuition can one entertain the

possibility of more scientific explanations (Rosset, 2008). In such situations the mind searches for an agent in order to complete the interpretive schema. Since natural agents are implausible as the cause for many of these events, a supernatural one is often credited. Gods are these supernatural agents.

Clues that such interpretations are interpretation *only* and not an accurate description of reality can be found in abundance. For instance, accidents that leave victims paralyzed from the neck down would seemingly pose a nearly insurmountable block to such an interpretation, but instead of revising the heuristic of “Everything happens for a reason,” ad hoc rationalizations are added in the form of “God works in mysterious ways” or “We cannot know, but God knows why” as a means to preserve the interpretation. As I hoped to demonstrate with the example of the Upper Big Branch mine disaster and the pastor’s sermon following it, maintaining the social-causal heuristic is of much more psychological value than logical coherence. Indeed, there is even another common rhetorical phrase that allows for easy rationalizations: “Sometimes God says yes, sometimes He says no, and sometimes He says wait.” When analyzed, it becomes apparent that this is just an anthropomorphic overlay of intentionality on the possible outcomes of events: positive, negative, and null.

Surely, such crude anthropomorphisms do not inhabit the carefully articulated arguments of philosophers? Well, in a sense the answer is no, they do not. However, they can be seen in the background of the texts. With careful attention given to the rhetoric of these philosophical arguments, one of the primary claims of the cognitive-scientific account of religion bears out—that religion is an outgrowth of mundane psychological processes that humans use every day. As religious scholar Ilkka Pyysiainen puts it: “We can clearly detect the folk-psychological understanding of agency in the background of reflective theology” (2009, p. 136). And, as I would add, these processes can be found in philosophical arguments for theism since

philosophical theology and philosophy of religion are two disciplines that have come to increasingly overlap in recent years (Gericke, 2009, p. 1).

In this chapter I am going to deal with a very familiar philosophical argument for God, the cosmological (or first cause) argument as well as one that may be less familiar: Alvin Plantinga's argument that belief in God is justified by way of analogy to our belief in other human minds.

The Cosmological Argument

One of the most familiar and influential arguments for the existence of God in the Western monotheistic tradition is that of the cosmological argument. Philosopher J. L. Mackie writes:

The cosmological argument [...] is *par excellence* the philosopher's argument for theism. It has been presented in many forms, but in one version or another it has been used by Greek, Arabic, Jewish, and Christian philosophers and theologians, including Plato, Aristotle, al Farabi, al Ghazali, ibn Rushd (Averroes), Maimonides, Aquinas, Spinoza, and Leibniz. (Mackie, 1982, p. 81)

If the claims of this thesis are correct—that interventionist religion is primarily a tool humans use to interpret impersonal reality as socially responsive—one should be able to detect the influence of folk-psychological processes in an argument even of such pedigree.

A great example of this argument is articulated by William Lane Craig. As one of the foremost evangelical apologists and Christian philosophers active today, Craig writes, lectures, and debates extensively on the subject of Christianity and God. However, as I hope to show,

parts of his argument are weak, not because of his lack of philosophical acumen, but because he is still utilizing non-rational psychological intuitions as an integral part of his reasoning and rhetoric. Craig's version of the cosmological argument reads:

1. Everything that exists has an explanation of its existence, either in the necessity of its own nature or in an external cause.
2. If the universe has an explanation of its existence, that explanation is God.
3. The universe exists.
4. Therefore, the explanation of the universe's existence is God.

This argument is logically valid, so the only question is the truth of the premises.

Premise (3) is undeniable for any sincere seeker of truth, so the question comes down to (1) and (2).

Premise (1) seems quite plausible. Imagine that you're walking through the woods and come upon a translucent ball lying on the forest floor. You would find quite bizarre the claim that the ball just exists inexplicably. And increasing the size of the ball, even until it becomes co-extensive with the cosmos, would do nothing to eliminate the need for an explanation of its existence.

Premise (2) might at first appear controversial, but it is in fact synonymous with the usual atheist claim that if God does not exist, then the universe has no explanation of its existence. Besides, (2) is quite plausible in its own right. *For an external cause of the universe must be beyond space and time and therefore cannot be physical or material. Now there are only two kinds of things that fit that description: either abstract objects, like numbers, or else an intelligent mind. But abstract objects are causally impotent. The number 7, for example, can't cause anything. Therefore, it follows that the explanation of the universe is an external, transcendent, personal mind that created the universe—which is what most people have traditionally meant by "God" [italics added].* (Craig, 2008)

There are many interesting things going on in this argument from the perspective of this thesis and I will look at them each in turn. Craig makes an analogical error, misattributes certain properties, commits the conjunction fallacy, and omits the conditions of premise (1) from premise

(2). One would think that a philosopher would avoid these errors much like one would a diseased carcass, but as I hope to show, they are natural errors that human psychology is prone to when thinking about causation. Furthermore, even in its erroneous format, the rhetoric attached to these arguments is more persuasive to many individuals than a carefully explicated and error-free logical analysis because it aligns with intuitions.

1. The analogical error.

Craig assigns the properties of *mind* and *transcendence* to “cause” in the argument and tries to justify this by stating that the cause “must be beyond space and time and therefore cannot be physical or material” but this is a very weak claim (even ignoring current cosmological models that posit natural causes beyond the space and time *of this universe* [see e.g. Hawking & Mlodinow, 2010; Stenger, 2007]). All known minds may be immaterial in an epiphenomenal sense but they are always tied to a material substrate—the brain—for function, location, and causal potency. As the entire body of evidence provided by neuroscience has shown, the existence of a disembodied mind doesn’t withstand rational scrutiny as even anecdotal examples like Phineas Gage amply demonstrate (Cf. Bloom, 2004; Pinker, 1997).

One may object that this is not Craig’s argument. He is arguing for the acceptance of a god-mind as an initial cause of the universe, not for mundane minds known to exist in ourselves and other humans. This is true. However, his argument hinges on the analogy and in this respect offers only a tangential connection since all known minds *require* a material substrate and the mind he is arguing for is *necessarily* immaterial.

This error offers a glimpse into the cognition underlying these arguments. Why does Craig argue thusly? One plausible reason is that in order to mentally represent other minds, humans do not require a body around (Barrett, J. qtd. in Brooks, 2009) and this leads our thinking to the intuitive conclusion that minds may exist without a material substrate, although this is known to be empirically false. As it is an intuitive conclusion, many readers of Craig's rhetoric will see no problem at all in the analogy of human minds to supernatural minds (this will be covered in depth later in the chapter with Plantinga's argument).

2. The misattribution of causal properties.

Significantly related to the above error, but with enough distinction to warrant a separate listing is Craig's granting causal potentiality to an immaterial mind. He writes:

“But abstract objects are causally impotent. The number 7, for example, can't cause anything. Therefore, it follows that the explanation of the universe is an external, transcendent, personal mind that created the universe.” (Craig, 2008)

Overlooking that a disembodied mind *is* an abstract object, how an immaterial mind may interact with a material universe is absent in this reasoning. Like the analogical error where Craig glossed over the empirical roadblocks in favor of an intuitive understanding, here his major problem is showing how a mind with no material intermediary (such as a body) may interact with a material environment. Looking through a psychological lens can shed some light.

Although it has just been said that it is intuitive to sometimes conceptualize minds without bodies, this does not mean that when forming our mind-concepts properties are abandoned that this departure from empirical reasoning would logically require. For instance, in

the everyday usage of this thinking, minds are known to inhabit bodies and can thusly influence the world and possess causal potency. It seems that even though that empirical detail is fundamental to the entire equation, it can be deleted while still retaining the properties that were dependent on it (Atran, 2002, p. 54; see also Humphrey, 1996, pp. 190-7). Thus, Craig is relying on more ultimately naïve, yet rhetorically effective lines of argument (because they conform more to our intuitions about minds and bodies than to strict logic). In our everyday thinking it is taken as reflexively true that minds have bodies and can thusly influence reality. Subtract the body and you have a causally impotent entity. But posit the existence of a mind and the ontological assumptions of causal efficacy are still present. Craig's argument thus takes advantage of a psychological sleight of hand.

3. *The conjunction fallacy.*¹¹

This error is a type of summation of the previous two. Craig is committing the conjunction fallacy when he assigns the properties of *mind* and *transcendence* to a cause. The conjunction fallacy occurs when an individual assigns a higher probability to a combination of events or circumstances rather than to individual events or circumstances. For instance, consider which of the two following situations are more probable:

A) an adult chosen at random from the American population will die of a heart attack within the next 10 years, or

¹¹ It should be pointed out that the conjunction fallacy specifically refers to probability and it is being applied to a logical argument in this case. However, the form of Craig's argument may be taken to implicitly ask the reader to assess the probabilities of its elements.

B) an adult chosen at random from the American population will be obese and will die of a heart attack within the next 10 years.

In problems of this type, the majority of people will respond that condition B is more probable showing that our intuitions are often incorrect in problems of this type (Sloman, 2005, p. 105). Some reflection on the two options makes it obvious—since people of all weights sometimes have heart attacks, it cannot be more probable that only a subgroup, the obese, will have more total heart attacks. It seems that in everyday reasoning it is easy to confuse the total probability of an event with an event that has two properties that are intuitively connected via causality. In this example, it is known that obesity is often a mitigating cause of heart attacks and thus one may unreflectively associate this as the circumstance with the highest probability since there is a clear causal relationship involved (Sloman, 2005, pp. 104-6).

Craig parallels this fallacious reasoning when he adds the properties of *mind* and *transcendence* to the cause of the universe. Plugged into the same format, one can clearly see the error:

A) the universe has a cause, or

B) the universe has a cause that is also transcendent and is a mind.

Craig would lead his reader to believe that choice B is most likely the best answer when in fact it is less probable in relation to the other choice since B has multiple properties and A has only one. He is making the same error of reasoning that led people to think that an adult chosen at random would be more likely to be *both* obese and have a heart attack than to simply have a heart attack.

If the underlying claims of this thesis are correct, then the default explanatory heuristic that human beings turn to is a social-causal one and the reason why a philosopher would make flawed arguments. Since humans are the most important facets of the environment to other

humans, it follows that perception is vitally attuned to human features and properties such as mind and intentionality (Guthrie, 1993) and that this affects cognition (Thagard, 2005). This Machiavellian intelligence was almost certainly an integral part of cognitive evolution (Cheney & Seyfarth, 2007) and is a central reason why religious reasoning exists to begin with (Tremelin, 2006). In such a light, Craig's cosmological argument becomes quite understandable.

Mechanistic and non-intentional causes, especially when connected to salient events (such as disasters and in this case—the ultimate cause of existence) are less plausible to human beings than one that fits within a social-causal framework. Since so much of the human world is already (and accurately) placed within this social-causal frame, the same schema is often erroneously used in domains where it yields inaccurate beliefs about causality. Thus, associating mind with the cause of the universe is an intuitive solution to that existential question, even if it is at best only weakly warranted by rational analysis.

4. Omitting the conditions of premise (1) from premise (2).

Or put in simpler and perhaps even trite language, “Who made God?” Craig's first and second premises read:

1. Everything that exists has an explanation of its existence, either in the necessity of its own nature or in an external cause.
2. If the universe has an explanation of its existence, that explanation is God. (Craig, 2008)

While the first condition mentions the possibility of existence being “the necessity of its own nature,” the second omits it. No reason is given for why the universe cannot exist by the necessity of its own nature while God can. It is a clear case of special pleading. Why

philosophers through the ages find that it is better for a god to be self-existent rather than the universe is not logically clear and at best not compelling (Mackie, 1982, pp. 81-101) but looked at through the lens of psychology the reasoning behind it may start to be illuminated.

Artifacts, natural objects, and agents (gods simply being a special case of agents) certainly occupy different ontological categories (Boyer, 2001, pp. 60-1) and as a result humans have much different intuitive assumptions about each. For instance, if I told you there is a jygagal in your room, you would not have any idea what would be waiting for you—whether it was a special tool or a dangerous animal or a newly discovered subatomic particle. Yet if I supplied the ontological category, such as “animal” you would without much conscious thought know that this creature reproduces, eats, drinks, and sleeps because that information is common to all animals. Why is this distinction important to understanding how both laymen and philosophers easily accept a self-caused god but not a self-caused universe? Whether one classes the universe as a natural object or as an artifact (created by a god) is of no importance here. What is important is that both cases differ from how agents (that possess minds and causal potency) are conceptualized.

The mind of an agent differs in our representational framework from other things populating our mental ontological rolodex such as rocks in that we can “simulate” a mind and this produces constraints. Indeed, this simulational constraint concerning minds is believed by some cognitive scientists to play a major role in the genesis of afterlife beliefs (Bering & Bjorklund, 2004). To briefly state the idea: when humans try to envision the state of death, it is accomplished with a conscious simulation—a contradiction in terms. It can never be known what it is “like” to be dead because any attempt to do so is being conducted while alive and conscious. In a study conducted by Bering & Bjorklund (2004, p. 219) people who did not believe in life after death were asked what a deceased accident victim was thinking. They reported things such as “He knows he’s dead now.”

I would put forth the idea that these types of constraints favor positing a self-existent agent with a mind (such as a god) over a self-existent object or material state (such as the universe) for several reasons. It is known what it is like to be a mind because to be conscious is to possess one. To think of other minds and states of consciousness is to simulate them and this makes it difficult to intuitively grasp their cessation. Positing a god-mind as the cause of the universe is rhetorically favorable because it is a matter of familiarity (since humans already have intimate knowledge of our own minds), analogous reasoning (using the familiar to understand the unfamiliar), and simulation constraints. It is also known that humans can create artifacts, and analogously, so the reasoning goes, a mind is the only things that can create things. With such reasons at hand, it becomes clearer why the logical inconsistency exists where many people find more plausible the rhetoric that supports an eternally existing supernatural god-mind than an eternally existing material state of the universe.

Granted, this line of argument is not perfect as a diagnosis of why people may favor theistic cosmological arguments over naturalistic ones. The simulation constraint comes into play only after a mind is believed to exist, not before. I am not aware of any research that asks these types of questions that would illuminate our thinking about minds *before* they exist, such as paralleling the accident victim study above except asking what Johnny was thinking before he was born. However, I do not think that this anachronism is fatal to the argument. Many people, as already outlined, have already accepted the existence of a god or gods on grounds other than philosophical arguments—namely because of their personal interpretation of everyday events within a social-causal frame. When asked to imagine which scenario is more likely, a self-existent being or a self-existent universe, intuitions sway toward the former because the human mind favors familiar explanations that mesh with the social heuristics already in use for interpreting a large portion of the world. Thus, the rhetoric conveying a flawed argument may be more effective than one conveying a logically spotless one. Hence the rhetorical effect of “Who

made God?”—although sometimes used to almost hackneyed lengths (e.g. Dawkins, 2006)—raises a legitimate and substantial objection to the cosmological argument for God but bounces off the bulwark of beliefs surrounding interventionist theism because it does not mesh with intuitions.

Plantinga and the “God and Other Minds” Argument

A lesser known philosophical argument for theism yet superbly illustrative for this thesis was put forth by Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga in 1967 in his aptly titled book *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God*. While it is argued in a rather obscure and laborious manner (see Bering, 2011, p. 232 for a similar assessment), the main argument can be briefly summed up in this way: belief in God is as natural an inference to make as the inference leading to belief in other human minds.¹² Additionally, since one comes to believe in other minds not on empirical grounds, belief in God likewise does not have to be justified on empirical grounds. (See Barrett, 2004, pp. 97-8 for another summary of this argument by Plantinga.)

As this thesis has been trying to argue, such a process is indeed at the heart of religious beliefs and Plantinga is giving philosophical justification (complete with its specialized rhetoric) to what is essentially a non-logical process:

Of course there may be other reasons for supposing that although rational belief in other minds does not require an answer to the epistemological question, rational belief in the

¹² Belief in other human minds, while taken for granted by most sane people, is not technically provable since one cannot directly access the thoughts of another person. It is possible that everyone except you is a robot programmed to act *as if* they had minds but in reality do not. Plantinga’s argument pivots on the way that one justifies belief in other minds and extends that justification to belief in a god-mind.

existence of God does. But it is certainly hard to see what these reasons might be. Hence my tentative conclusion: if my belief in other minds is rational, so is my belief in God. But obviously the former is rational; so, therefore, is the latter. (Plantinga, 1967/1990, p. 271)

Recall that, in the chapter “Building Gods,” one of the primary cognitive processes required for the formation of god concepts is inferring that other minds exist. This is called having a “theory of mind” and it is with this theory that the intuitive process for filling in agent concepts is carried out (for an agent to be an agent it has to have intentions and to have intentions it must have a mind). This sounds very similar to the point Plantinga is making. He is giving philosophical flesh to his intuitions.

In the preface that he wrote 33 years later, Plantinga still maintains the basic thrust of the argument he advanced in 1967:

What I argued, in essence, is that from this point of view belief in other minds and belief in God are on an epistemological par. In neither case are there cogent arguments of the sort required [for near certain philosophical justification]; hence if the absence of such arguments in the theistic case demonstrate irrationality, the same goes for belief in other minds. If you flout epistemic duty in accepting the one, then you flout it just as surely in accepting the other; hence if the former is irrational, so is the latter. But clearly the latter isn't irrational; this version of the evidentialist objection to theistic belief, therefore, is a failure. (Plantinga, 1967/1990, p. xii)

I certainly lack the philosophical expertise to comment at length on the “evidentialist objection to theistic belief,” but it seems that I may be making a version of it that may throw light on a major problem in Plantinga's reasoning if the god-mind he is arguing for intervenes in the world. One of the primary reasons why one can be sure that natural agents exist is that these agents produce a coherent pattern in their behavior, causal instigations, and intentions. Even with the erratic behavior of a lunatic there would be some form of coherence such as all the lunatic deeds done within a certain proximity (say within a 50 mile radius) and within a proximal time frame. One

would not expect deeds in Argentina, Russia, Malaysia, and Montana committed within a short time to be connected to one single agent, even an insane one. Thus, if an agent is indeed acting in the world—even an insane one—there is, by necessity, at least one connecting criterion by which to judge this. Needless to say, although there have been some in mythology, most gods are not considered lunatics.

Even relaxing spatial and chronological constraints on determining a coherent pattern of behavior does not help (since gods like the Christian one have the attribute of omnipotence). To say that there is divine action in the world and to make a meaningful statement acknowledges that there should be at least one property that can connect the dots, so to speak, and make a cogent case for a god's action. There isn't one. Additionally, there is even the rationalization that implicitly acknowledges this fatal shortcoming—the doctrine of divine mystery—or, as it is commonly rendered: “God works in mysterious ways.” This is the way things should be expected to be if divine intervention is simply an artifact of cognitive biases and not an accurate etiological description of reality.

The satisfactory evidence that a god's mind meets this criterion that human minds meet is absent; furthermore, the evidence that is often put forth is contradictory or ad hoc. For instance, the Confederacy claimed that God was willing in the institution of slavery while the Union claimed the opposite. Pat Robertson claimed that Katrina was God's retribution for a sinful New Orleans. As I hoped to show when discussing the mine disaster case, the primary goal of such lay attributions is to *frame* the event to fit the social heuristic even when no intention can be ascertained. While these are not the writings of philosophers, defenders of interventionist theologies fall into the same self-serving bias trap when arguing for specific doctrines and interpretations of noteworthy events when no objective standard can be established. Something that is said to be the Christian God's will by a Christian could be interpreted radically different by a Muslim or Hindu or even by a Christian of differing theological presumptions. There are no

standards to ascertain the Almighty's hand. Yet, with human minds, it is easy to establish a coherent pattern of behavior—the very thing that is lacking for a god. Plantinga's analogical argument, therefore, does not come close to establishing the epistemic equivalency between human minds and Gods' minds and this is probably a good thing for both believers and nonbelievers. Bering, in a discussion about Plantinga concerning this very issue, concurs with this assessment: "To say that the two cases—God's mind and other human minds—are 'in the same epistemological boat' is something of a stretch" (Bering, 2011, p. 232).

Since Plantinga's analogy fails on several fronts and given the ancillary reasons from psychology that demonstrate that these are the same errors that should be expected when the bias-filled human mind is thinking about these issues, it seems his argument is very shaky that belief in God is rational if that God he is arguing for intervenes in the world. This certainly is not to say that god beliefs are *irrational* but rather non-rational and at least partly intuitive. Plantinga certainly hasn't made the case that God's behavior, causal instigations, and intentions form a coherent pattern which would make them on par with belief in other minds and thus, rational. (However, to be fair that was not, at least primarily, the goal of his book.) It even seems that the objections I have outlined may be among the reasons that he anticipates but doubts will ever materialize when he writes "Of course there may be other reasons for supposing that although rational belief in other minds does not require an answer to the epistemological question, rational belief in the existence of God does. But it is certainly *hard to see* [italics added] what these reasons might be" (Plantinga, 1967/1990, p. 271). The objections previously laid forth here seem to qualify as these "hard to see" reasons.

Plantinga's argument seems to be an example, quite possibly *par excellence*, where the internal realities of psychological life that animate interventionist religious beliefs are taken and fleshed out into rhetorical argument. Belief in God's mind seems as rational to Plantinga as belief in human minds because the two instances are utilizing the same exact psychological

processes. The human brain evolved to interpret salient events within the social-causal frame and when events are obviously outside the control of these natural agents such as in disasters, the intuitive heuristic that pulls the mind toward that interpretation just requires us to posit another special type of mind to operate. Those special minds are possessed by gods. Even though the reasoning that backs these conclusions up about supernatural causation is shaky, it makes great intuitive sense and is very rhetorically effective. Craig's and Plantinga's rhetoric is articulated with philosophical precision and employs sophisticated reasoning but in the end each tells us more about how the mind operates than about how reality operates.

THEISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS: ATHEIST RHETORIC AND THE FUTURE OF THEISM

“It appears to me (whether rightly or wrongly) that direct arguments against Christianity and theism produce hardly any effect on the public.” – Charles Darwin (qtd. in Shermer, 2000, p. xxi)

“The spirits I have raised abandon me—

The spells I have studied baffle me—

The remedy I reck’d of totured me;

I lean no more on super-human aid.” – from Byron’s “Manfred” (Byron, 2003, p. 611)

In the preceding chapters I have hoped to show that one of the primary purposes of interventionist religious rhetoric is to place events within a social-causal frame.¹³ The agentive heuristic¹⁴ of causation is a characteristic of human cognition that became part of our cognitive equipment because it is very useful and effectively correct much of the time because agents *do* occupy so much of our environment, both in physical reality and as mental representations. This

¹³ To recall the definition: social causation is causation that has a social component of at least two interacting agents. The framing component is to narrate an event as if it had the property of being socially caused.

¹⁴ Agentive heuristic: The heuristic of human thought that, in many or even most situations assumes an agent is the cause of events. This was a good evolutionary strategy. It is safer to assume that the creak in the boards is a robber’s step and not temperature contraction because it is very costly to misdiagnose a violent thief (agent) and not very costly to get out of bed and see nothing is there.

takes place on two levels. The first is agency *detection* where individuals are prone to jump to the conclusion that there is an acting agent both as an abstract inference (Barrett, 2004) and from visual stimuli (Guthrie, 1993). The second is the mental constraint wherein, similar to filling out Burke's pentad, understanding events as composed of agents and agency (no matter the actual existence or non-existence of an agent) is very psychologically plausible as well as rhetorically effective. Similar to the way in which models can be fundamentally incorrect but serve as powerful tools of understanding (such as the Ptolemaic model of the solar system), interventionist theism serves as a powerful tool for understanding the causal structure of reality even if its claims of constant intervention and oversight are logically contradictory and lacking a coherent pattern.

Theistic social framing¹⁵ serves many purposes. It can demystify (even if that sounds paradoxical) moral and ethical choices by lifting them from their non-conscious and largely intuitive bases (Hauser, 2006) by giving them explicit expression in codes granted authority (ethos) by a deity. It can serve as a tool for reducing complex natural phenomena into simple intentional actions (like Pat Robertson did with Katrina). It can disallow despair by positing that there is meaning in intention-less events (as in the UBB mine disaster). And, it can grant a sense of control since it posits a social-reciprocal understanding of events where humans may petition for intervention where they otherwise may have very little control (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). All of these fall under the larger heading of social-causal framing.

Meeting these deep-seated human needs is at the foreground of interventionist religious rhetoric. By tapping the already present cognitive predispositions, interventionist religious rhetoric can skirt some conventions and standards that some other types of rhetoric and argument are held to. For example, it is not strange to hear of doctors who might apply strictly logical and

¹⁵ Theistic social framing: Framing events as the intentional actions or at least under the possible control of a deity. This can encompass "neutral intentionality" where gods are conceived to "let" (usually bad) things happen but nevertheless have some (oftentimes unknown or unknowable) intention in mind.

scientific standards to reasoning about the efficacy of drugs to immediately relax these standards when touting “spiritual remedies” such as prayer.¹⁶ Although such practices may of course provide emotional well-being to the patient and may even induce placebo effects (Dawkins, 2006, pp. 61-66), to claim actual, direct causal efficacy on behalf of such practices doesn’t withstand scrutiny. Claims often become fuzzy in such instances because of the perceived differences between spiritual health and physical health. But as recounted earlier by the anecdote of the man with the broken leg, at least a sizable portion of believers think God is actively involved in biological healing processes—a situation that makes religious claims amenable to empirical evaluation. Study after study shows a complete lack of any type of direct causal efficacy for prayer (Stenger, 2007, pp. 94-102).

Having these many characteristics of religious rhetoric accounted for, the characteristics and purposes of atheist rhetoric can be addressed.

Although atheism has been historically recorded in one form or another since the early Greek philosophers (Edis, 2008, pp. 1-32), I will largely keep the focus of the discussion on atheism in general and on what has been called the “New Atheism.” This movement began in 2004 with the publication of Sam Harris’ book “The End of Faith” (Stenger, 2009, p. 25) and usually includes the authors Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens in addition to Harris. The movement has been criticized as reactionary in response to George W. Bush era evangelicalism in politics as well as to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City. Indeed, Harris states directly that “I began writing this book on September 12, 2001” (Harris, 2004, p. 333). While the movement is reactionary to those two things, I think that Bush era politics and the 9-11 terrorist attacks were merely the catalysts and the movement is reacting to something much deeper and far older:

¹⁶ I personally received such advice from a doctor several years ago.

The seminal social thinkers of the nineteenth century—August Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud—all believed that religion would gradually fade in importance and cease to be significant with the advent of the industrial society. (Norris & Inglehart, 2004, p. 3)

As the secularization thesis, as the above is generally referred to, has largely failed to come to fruition (Stark, 1999) it seems that there has been a growing frustration toward the continued strong presence of religion among those that see religion as a detrimental aspect of humanity. Indeed, I can partly empathize with this when it comes to fundamentalism and interventionist theology. In that area and with the viewing of religion as a purely human phenomenon, I can totally agree with these authors. However, when some of the stronger claims are made such as that humanity would be better off in the absence of *all* religion, I have to part ways. Religion and its accompanying rhetoric speak to deep aspects of humanity and atheism doesn't necessarily offer anything to replace this.

Indeed, it is in this regard that I think the “New Atheists” are making a large oversight. The psychology that finds expression in religion does not disappear if religion is removed, nor is the irrationality that sometimes finds outlet in supernaturalism automatically transformed into rationality. In Western European countries where institutional religion has been marginalized to a moderate extent, the citizenry have not been transformed into paragons of rationalism and scientific naturalism. Rather; vague notions of a “higher power” and various New Age and spiritual beliefs have moved into the void (Zuckerman, 2008).

Granted, I do not want to misrepresent the arguments that the “New Atheists” have made in saying that they specifically make the claim that humanity would *necessarily* be better off if religion completely disappeared. They do not make such a strong claim. However, in critiquing the validity of religion they do not offer a replacement for the needs that religion fulfills. Take, for instance, the sacrificial aspects of the Christ figure in Christianity. As Kenneth Burke warned

in *Permanence and Change*, showing that this is a “magical scheme” (Burke, 1965, p. 16) and simply dismissing it on those grounds can be dangerous. Instead of finding an outlet in the relatively benign and known institution of religion, the needs may find less healthy forms of expression. Burke gives us the example of how the Nazis used the Jews as a similar scapegoat that could “unburden” people of their “sins” (Burke, 1961, p. 217; see also Burke, 1969, pp. 406-7).

With those objections noted, I’d like to get to the main issue to be raised regarding atheist rhetoric—the fact that it often misunderstands (certainly not *always*) religion as a set of propositions rather than an active and utile interpretive framework. Indeed, one can infer (with caution) that atheists often make this mistake from a study (Pew Forum, 2010) showing that atheists and agnostics scored the highest among all groups in religious knowledge. The test measured propositional knowledge about religion ranging from church and state issues in the U.S. to historical religious figures like Jonathan Edwards and Maimonides. This is a speculative inference to draw from these data but it does hold that if the claims of this thesis are correct, specific content, while important is *less important* than the causal qualities of religion to believers. It is more important to be able to interpret one’s life circumstances within a social-causal frame (“God’s will” in common parlance) than it is to believe specific propositions like “David killed Goliath.” This is even explicitly stated in evangelical literature as the “personal relationship with Christ” (e.g. Warren, 2002, pp. 85-91) where the “relationship with Christ” is interpreting the events in one’s life as the intentional actions of Jesus. In this scheme, unintentional events can become socially relational. This ability to become utile frames of interpretation is what sets religious myths off from other myths and fiction (Tremelin, 2006, p. 122). It would also tentatively follow that atheists might tend to misunderstand religious belief as a set of propositions like “God exists,” “Jesus rose from the dead,” or “Mohammed is God’s prophet” rather than for the causal qualities that follow from or lead to those propositions.

Indeed, if religion is more about *interpreting life events* than believing specific propositions, these survey results should be expected. Thus, shortcoming number one of atheist rhetoric:

1) Atheist rhetoric is often ineffective because it mistakenly assumes that religions and gods are primarily about factual, propositional beliefs rather than social-causal and heuristic in nature.

This can be seen baldly reflected in some statements by the New Atheists:

The “Christian” I address throughout is a Christian in the narrow sense of the term. Such a person believes, at a minimum, that the bible is the inspired word of God and that only those who accept the divinity of Jesus Christ will experience salvation after death.

(Harris, 2006, p. viii)

With such a statement, Harris (even with the use of a restricted definition) is placing the emphasis on propositional content. This can be seen in a quote from Hitchens as well:

There still remain four irreducible objections to religious faith: that it wholly misrepresents the origins of man and the cosmos, that because of this original error it manages to combine the maximum of servility with the maximum of solipsism, that it is both the result and the cause of dangerous sexual repression, and that it is ultimately grounded on wishful thinking. (Hitchens, 2007, p. 4)

If I were in the frame of mind to write such a polemical statement as that, I would say that one of the chief errors of interventionist religious thought is that it interprets mindless, natural events as intentional. Indeed, there is a hint of that in Hitchens’ statement—that religion is mistaken when

it views the creation of the universe as an intentional act. However, the way that he frames the statement (and his subsequent argument) is one that attacks religion on grounds of propositions.¹⁷

The commonsense admonition that you shouldn't talk politics and religion among polite company isn't without a scientific basis and can shed some light on this discussion. There is something that sets these beliefs apart from others—namely their causal nature—and it is this aspect that atheist rhetoric does not emphasize as a primary feature of interventionist religion.

Concerning this, cognitive scientist Steve Sloman writes:

This is obvious in politics where people commonly stick to their causal beliefs regardless of the facts. Politicians, successful ones anyway, have long known not to bother trying to dissuade firm believers with facts. Firm believers are rarely interested in facts; they are interested in perpetuating their causal beliefs, beliefs that may have at one time been based on facts but are no longer tied to them. Failures of the free market are as easily explained by conservatives (as due to “irrational exuberance,” say) as failures of the welfare system are by liberals (perhaps as a “bureaucracy out of control”). Both explanations may be right. What's noteworthy (and a little scary) is how easy it is to generate good explanations in support of one's causal beliefs regardless of the facts. (Sloman, 2005, p. 106)

Reading Sloman's example recalls the UBB mine disaster where the causal frame of a loving and caring God was kept even when that was contradicted by the circumstances. The ad hoc rationalizations were as easily generated as those in the political examples.

¹⁷ As a short digression here, corrections of factual propositions don't seem to elicit much negative feeling, but ones of a causal nature do. If this is correct, it can help explain why so many accusations of rudeness and shrillness are heaped upon the New Atheists. For instance, I do not mind blunt corrections in matters of fact like “No Adam, Charleston is not the capital of Alaska,” but in more abstract situations and in matters of causation, corrections can elicit emotional reactions. For instance, “No Adam, a blastocyst is a human being” regarding the abortion issue can elicit deeper reactions because “a fetus is a human being” is not a simple propositional claim. It brings to bear all types of assumptions about causation such as what causes and intentions work together to make a human being. I do not think that the usual distinction drawn here as one topic being emotionally salient and the other not is sufficient to distinguish these types of claims. The deeper explanation needs to get at causality because oftentimes the emotions are after the fact reactions and not causes themselves.

Thus some of the critiques of the new atheist rhetoric in that it doesn't bring theological sophistication to the table may be well-founded (e.g. O'Hehir, 2009) since it seems to misunderstand religion on at least one fundamental level. However, I would point out that the atheist rebuttals are sound when viewed within a certain context: a large portion of religious believers lack theological sophistication as is evidenced by the Pew research (Pew Forum, 2010; for a detailed discussion see Stark, 2008) and so New Atheist rhetoric can be seen to be simply addressing the largest audience demographic.

While philosophically and logically sound and possibly possessing the strongest arguments, atheist rhetoric, by its very nature, necessarily lacks many of the features that make theistic rhetoric persuasive and attractive to billions of humans worldwide. One of these features is religious moral codes and this brings up shortcoming number two of atheist rhetoric:

2) Atheist rhetoric is often ineffective because its associated humanism-based ethical systems lack the straightforwardness of divine command systems.

It is empirically and demonstrably false that morality requires religion. One needs to look no further than highly secular nations like Denmark and Sweden that have low levels of crime and high scores on happiness and well-being in comparison to highly religious nations like the U.S. that score poorly to see this demonstrated (Zuckerman, 2008). Of course this doesn't mean that there is a simplistic correlation between religion and morality as there are obviously a whole suite of factors that affect morality on a societal scale. It does, however, put to bed the simplistic notion that piety necessarily begets and is required for a moral society.

Empirical reality, however, doesn't necessarily translate into what is most rhetorically effective. It seems that it may be easier to think about morality within a religious frame.

Fundamentalists like Ken Ham, president of the creationist organization Answers in Genesis and CEO of the "Creation Museum" in Kentucky, write things such as:

"A group that does not believe in God—a group that therefore has no basis whatsoever to accuse anyone on moral grounds [...]. By what absolute moral standard have they made their determinations, other than their own opinion? How inconsistent can they get?!"

(Ham, 2010)

Forgiving Ham for his pork-fisted hyperbole and philosophical naivety, this type of reasoning is typical among fundamentalisms—especially of Christianity and Islam (Edis, 2007, p. 28). Why this is so becomes clearer with a better understanding of morality. According to Marc Hauser, one of the leaders in the emerging field of the science of morality, grammar is an excellent analogical way to understand morality. Hauser cites data demonstrating that morality is often operating at an unconscious level in human beings. Tests reveal that when subjects make a moral choice they often can only offer incoherent justifications: "When people attempt to explain their moral judgments, they are often dumbfounded, appealing to hunches or conflicting accounts" (Hauser, 2006, p. 156).

Hauser's comparison of morality to linguistic grammar seems to be accurate given that most native speakers can form perfectly grammatical sentences but if asked about detailed grammatical structures and relationships, they fail miserably. It is almost a direct parallel to the way that most individuals practice moral behavior and yet, as the study showed, cannot explain how or why their decisions came about except in an ad hoc manner. This looks to be one of the main reasons that religion enjoys its special status in regards to morality. Divine revelatory precepts are overt manifestations of moral principles—something people otherwise have little or

no conscious access to. It doesn't matter if religious morals may be outdated or inappropriate; they often are the only available source of a description of morality.

It becomes clear that religion serves as the framing device for morality rather than its source when one looks at specific examples such as the religiously charged rhetoric surrounding slavery during the American Civil War. The Bible can be said to be neutral on the subject of slavery; with a more critical reading it could be said that it is positively for the practice with passages such as Leviticus 25:44-6.¹⁸ Or, conversely, it could be said to be against the practice if one emphasizes the Golden Rule and other similar precepts. Leaving aside the matters of hermeneutics and exegesis to theologians, the point here is that the Bible was never the source of the ethics surrounding slavery—it was the framing device. In most cases, it seems that people brought their own moral judgments to the table and merely justified and framed them with the authority that the Bible provided.

Supporting this interpretation, Phil Zuckerman records the answer to the question: “What does being a Christian mean to you?” in an interview with a secular Western European school teacher:

If I look at someone who is deeply religious—every week he goes to church, every day he is praying to God and so on—I'm not that. But Christianity has brought us—in our society, in our culture—I think it's very good because it gives me...something to refer to—how to behave as a good person, perhaps. You have something to refer to...an “*ethical frame*” [italics added]. (Zuckerman, 2008, p. 158)

¹⁸ Leviticus 25:44-46 Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves. You may also buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your property. You can bequeath them to your children as inherited property and can make them slaves for life, but you must not rule over your fellow Israelites ruthlessly. (NIV)

With such examples, it becomes clear why atheist rhetoric will always suffer from a disadvantage in this realm—there is no easy appeal to divine commands and no readymade *ethical frame* as the interviewee put it.

To further underscore this point, a recent study showed that people’s judgment of God’s stance on certain moral issues like abortion and the death penalty consistently mirrored their own— even in a before and after condition where the people had changed their minds. God also changed his mind (Epley, Converse, Delbosc, Monteleone, & Cacioppo, 2009). This provides empirical support to what thinkers on religion have suspected for quite some time (that gods are at least partly projections of self) and directly contradicts the notions of Ken Ham-like fundamentalists that hold that their morals come from a holy scripture and that God provides a timeless and objective moral standard. Rather, “God” is the frame into which morality is often placed.

Atheist rhetoric in this realm certainly isn’t at a complete loss. Among ethical philosophers divine command is held to be the best system by only a small minority (De Waal, 2006). Perhaps atheist rhetoric can draw on the authority of respected philosophers and ethicists or emphasize the major shortcomings of religiously derived ethics—such as pointing out that the Ten Commandments leave out rape but include blasphemy in its list of most important crimes to prohibit.

However, these strengths pale in comparison to the accessible attractiveness of divine commands and their ability to easily frame morality. It doesn’t matter that one can achieve a robust and humane ethical frame without religion and that humanistic universal appeals to empathy and reason are capable of achieving this. Nor does it matter that fundamentalist appeals to the absolute moral authority of the Bible are lackadaisically self-serving and inconsistent. This inconsistency is exemplified by outrage towards gay marriage while lacking even a peep about

heterosexual divorce—something that is equally against divine moral precepts when using a literalist exegesis of the Bible. But, just as in the case of maintaining the heuristic of social causation even in the face of contradictions is the primary goal of some interventionist religious rhetoric because that is cognitively efficient and valuable, preserving the divine-command *frame* to morality is of utmost importance even in the face of obvious contradictions.

It seems that ethical frames play a major role in how atheists themselves are perceived as well. A recent University of Minnesota study (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006) found that among groups in American society, atheists are the most distrusted by a wide margin. Nearly 40% of respondents said that atheists do not agree with their own vision of society compared to next least trusted groups of Muslims at 26% and homosexuals at 22% (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006, p. 218). When viewed in the current context it is clear why this is so. If religion is the framing device used for morality and ethics, atheists would be perceived by many as amoral and therefore to be distrusted. Not only is religion the framing device for morality, it serves as the identifying marker for it.

As atheist rhetoric can lack the social and moral framing elements that make certain types of religious rhetoric highly attractive and persuasive, it can similarly lack certain intuitive teleological elements, bringing point three to bear.

3) Atheist rhetoric is often ineffective because it lacks the inherent and assumed social teleology present within interventionist theism.

Disasters, whether one is directly affected or not, can be some of the most powerful situations encountered in life. This is apparent from the prevalence of “flashbulb memories” that

many Americans carry around regarding exactly where and what they were doing after learning of the September 11, 2001 disaster. The formation of such memories is dependent on high levels of emotional arousal (Myers, 1999, p. 232). Even though these memories may seem to be “etched” in the mind, during the time following such highly salient events, verbal narrative and rhetoric can dramatically shape recall as well (Atran, 2002, pp. 161-3). Given this, it is no surprise that kairos-empowered interventionist religious rhetoric is one of the consistent communications heard after such happenings. Ranging from terrorist attacks to earthquakes and heard from low-brow and high-brow sources alike, there is no shortage of theological glosses to such events. A deep sense of kairos is nearly an intuitive rhetorical skill that rhetors seeking to further interventionist theologies possess. During such salient, affecting episodes the human mind is primed to search for a meaning:

The search for meaning in extraordinary episodes lies at the core of the cognitive processes that produce FM [flashbulb memory] effects in the first place. The surprising nature of the episode triggers a frustrated search for relevant meanings, and when no suitable schema can be found, a new one is established. (Whitehouse, 2004, p. 114)

I would take this further and say that the search for relevant meanings is centered on a particular type of meaning—the social. After all, there can be no meaning (in the most often used sense of the word) without an intentional agent behind an event. A tree falling on your house during a wind storm is a perfectly meaningless and intention-less event in and of itself. (Of course, subsequent effects of the event may indeed be very meaningful.) But a tree falling on your house after you had called the cops on your neighbor for a loud party and with clear chain-saw marks at its base is an intentional and meaningful event in the sense that there may be more relevant consequences associated with the agent behind the event—your angry neighbor. Interventionist theistic rhetoric almost always assumes events to be of the latter type—even when there are no clear signs that point to an agent like the chain saw marks.

To take another example, the January 2010 Haiti earthquake was a catastrophic event that provoked many public religious figures to speak out. Pat Robertson stated that it was due to a pseudo-historical “pact with the devil” that the Haitians had made as part of their political revolution (Pat Robertson Cites Haiti’s Earthquake As What Happens When You ‘Swear A Pact To The Devil’, 2010).

However, even the more intellectually respectable president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Albert Mohler made a similar claim. In his statement, he downplays the role of this mythic pact but instead posits a possible culpability in the supposed wickedness of religious syncretism in Haiti where his own version of “Biblical Christianity” has been mixed with voodoo and distorted by “the occult” (Mohler, 2010, January 14). Mohler is careful to qualify his diagnosis of divine intent as merely *possible*. He stops short of directly laying blame but nevertheless states that there *is* an agent behind the movement of tectonic plates: “God’s rule over creation involves both direct and indirect acts, but his rule is constant. [...] And yet, we have no right to claim that we know why a disaster like the earthquake in Haiti happened” (Mohler, 2010, January 14).

Just as in the preacher’s rhetoric surrounding the UBB mine disaster, Mohler maintains that the event is interpretable within a social frame—that there were intentions behind the event but humans cannot know them. Mohler continues: “The arrogance of human presumption is a real and present danger. We can trace the effects of a drunk driver to a car accident, but we cannot trace the effects of voodoo to an earthquake—at least not so directly” (Mohler, 2010, January 14). Notice that the placement of the event within a teleological social frame is taken for granted by Mohler. He doesn’t even consider that there may be no connection between voodoo and an earthquake—that there may be no socially caused “why.” By using Mohler’s own model of causation, it would be no more of a logical leap to presume that if there was a powerful supernatural agent that was interested in the behavior of fleas then it might choose to alter

weather patterns, causing it to rain on dogs in order to drown some of the offending parasites in wet fur.

To maintain that there was indeed some meaning and social causation in the movement of earth's crust one is constrained to come to this type of, often absurd, conclusions such as that voodoo can provoke a god who can in turn (though either directly or indirectly) affect tectonic plates. As noted at length earlier, this isn't simply dismissed out of hand. If indeed there were divine interventions, there would be a discernable pattern. Instead, there is nothing except various religions claiming various interpretations for various gods that are indistinguishable from mindless, natural forces or, in instances such as human history, completely and satisfactorily explained by human agency without recourse to supernatural agency. This makes a universally underlying psychological denominator such the social-causal heuristic a much better explanation as to why this type of interpretation of events is held so widely in human culture. The psychological plausibility of such an interpretation is high because humans are social creatures and tend to overuse the social heuristic in areas where it is inapplicable (Davis, 2009). Indeed, if asked to sum up interventionist religion in three words I would say "misapplied social heuristics."

Atheist rhetoric obviously avoids such teleological explanations where none are warranted but in doing so lacks the social meaning such explanations can provide. This isn't to say that atheist rhetoric must wallow in nihilism in the face of mindless nature; on the contrary—there is much room for finding *personal* meaning in such events. Positively responding to such adversity—such as taking advantage of the opportunity to help others or learning how to conduct oneself in extraordinary circumstances are just a few among many. However, even with these in tow atheist rhetoric lacks the attractive and powerful aspect of "personifying the grand scheme of things"—to use Don Cupitt's phrase—that interventionist religion owns (Cupitt, 1997). At the center of this issue rests the next point.

4) Atheist rhetoric is often ineffective because it lacks the perceived social-reciprocal relationship with reality that theism has.

“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” – Joshua 24:15 (NIV)

Why do people most often pray? The answer is the obvious one—they want the deity that they believe in to cause or oversee things that they ask for and are relevant in their lives. Whether this is to help them get enough food in their belly, to heal an injury, or find the right date it is one of the core reasons why religious beliefs are adhered to. Indeed, this characteristic of religion has been sometimes downplayed and neglected in the past study of religion because academic theology oftentimes reinterprets prayer as something like meditation in an effort to make folk-religion¹⁹ appear less superstitious (Geertz, 2008, p. 6). Todd Tremlin writes:

Contrary to long-standing explanations for religion—that it provides answers to existential questions, that it staves off psychological trauma, that it holds society together—the most central role that religion plays in people’s lives is to get things done, to make things right, and to keep them that way. (Tremlin, 2006, p. 112)

These are the gods praised in small Evangelical churches, prayed to in rural mosques, and that lurk in the shadows outside the light of the village fire. These are the gods of reified myth and legend—except to their believers they are no myth or legend. These gods actually do things. They are perceived as real agencies. Tremlin continues:

It’s telling, too, that in religions that teach the existence of some ultimate power or impersonal divinity—the forces of Tao, Brahman, and Buddha-nature, the creator gods of

¹⁹ Folk-religion: non-systematized versions of religion—“religion on the ground” as it is referred to in some anthropological literature. In other words it is theologically unsophisticated. Likewise, folk-psychology comprises the intuitive notions of psychology utilized by people in everyday thinking, not the systematized, scientific version.

many African Tribes and of early American deists—such ideas are almost completely ignored in favor of more personal and practical deities. (Tremelin, 2006, p. 123)

The impersonal Deity of Thomas Jefferson may provide an explanation for the beginning of the universe but it doesn't help gather food after the country has been destroyed by an earthquake or listen to sincere petitions to ease a toothache. That rarefied god has no everyday causal potency. Rather, the gods that have the most believers are the “gods next door” and not an aloof deity somewhere in another galaxy. As way of illustrating this point, in the religious systems that teach “high theology” such as Christianity and Islam, there are lesser, more intimate supernatural agents such as saints and angels (and demons and jinn) that take the place of God (and Satan) when the big guys can't be bothered with trivialities or condescended to for an explanation of an event that nevertheless needs to be placed in a social-causal frame.

Such a conceptual framework is evident in many diverse forms of interventionist religious rhetoric. From dense theological musings in academic texts to simple status expressions on Facebook, the thinking, as evidenced by the rhetoric, is everywhere. The phrase “I'm thankful for all of God's blessings in my life” and ones like it are plentiful in common parlance and likely to be uttered by highly religious as well as secular individuals (even if “God's blessings” is shortened to “blessings” in the latter case). In both instances I advance the claim that neither God nor His blessings are the reasons why the theological impetus and expression exists. Rather, the social heuristic in our minds that makes it intuitive to be grateful is the primary impetus behind it. Al Mohler provides a fantastic example from a frank posting about Thanksgiving:

Thanksgiving is a deeply theological act, rightly understood. As a matter of fact, thankfulness is a theology in microcosm—a key to understanding what we really believe about God, ourselves, and the world we experience. A haunting question is this: How do atheists observe Thanksgiving? I can easily understand that an atheist or agnostic would think of fellow human beings and feel led to express gratitude to all those who, both directly and indirectly, have contributed to their lives. But what about the blessings that

cannot be ascribed to human agency? Those are both more numerous and more significant, ranging from the universe we experience to the gift of life itself. Can one really be thankful without being thankful to someone? It makes no sense to express thankfulness to a purely naturalistic system. (Mohler, 2009)

Notice that, once again, Mohler never even considers interpreting things outside of a social-causal frame. To him, everything is socially caused and with that belief it makes sense to be thankful to some agent regardless of whether that agent is clearly present.

This aspect of cognition is deeper than merely interventionist religious thought as well. It is a deep social exchange heuristic as evidenced by instances of secular individuals feeling the same way in situations like Mohler posits. Hank Davis gives us an anecdote about an irreligious friend of his whose wife had been suffering from possibly life-threatening medical problems. After some tests were administered anxious waiting ensued. The husband and wife were at the hospital when the results were returned.

She was OK. The condition was treatable. The illness was not life threatening. They were immensely relieved. My friend left her room and walked downstairs to the chapel. He went to the back of the room where a guestbook encouraged visitors to leave a brief message. He wrote, "Thank you," and left. He did not write "Thank you God." He did not pray. He simply [...] felt an irresistible urge to say "Thank you." [...] A gift had been received and some circuitry had been triggered in him. The only logical endpoint was the utterance of "Thank you." Social exchange in action: You give. I receive. I thank. Anything less would be a violation of something very fundamental about human nature. (Davis, 2009, pp. 49-50)

Whatever else they may or may not be, gods are servile to human psychological needs. Need someone to thank? The friendly neighborhood deity is there to help.

These gods are made in the image of pragmatism and the process does not stop there. Many believers who may give the "theologically correct" answer (that God is an omniscient, omnipotent, transcendent being) when asked about their beliefs may still think of gods in highly

anthropomorphic terms. One such example is provided by a study where people who had already answered that God was omnipotent nevertheless retold stories they were asked to memorize as if the all-powerful god had to complete tasks in a limited, linear manner (Slone, 2004, pp. 65-6). Thus, not only are gods about doing things in people's lives, they are very human-like in the way they are perceived to do them.

Relationships with gods are also analogous to the mundane human world in their social-relational aspects. In human relationships one regularly only completes favors for friends, family, loved ones, and fellow co-operators such as co-workers.²⁰ The way to establish and retain such relationships is by adhering to behavioral expectations. This might be termed "behavioral capital." For example, Jill might not answer a 3 a.m. call from a very unreliable friend who constantly offends and disappoints; their behavioral capital with her would be very low and Jill might not feel inclined to help. On the other hand, a very reliable and trustworthy friend could probably count on Jill to answer that phone call; that friend would have a high amount of behavioral capital with Jill (See Frijters & Baron, 2010 for a related study). Relationships with deities are conceptualized in much the same way.

This reciprocal relationship can manifest in many forms. In antiquity this was very likely the reasoning behind animal sacrifice. Since gods cannot be directly interacted with—as the mostly unconscious intuitions would go—the person must give up something as a costly and non-fakable signal. To illustrate this, one can imagine if a loved one was imprisoned. It would be impossible to communicate with them except through Plexiglas (analogous to prayer offered to a

²⁰ "Good Samaritan" behavior that does not conform to these conditions, while certainly laudable, is not the norm and shouldn't be taken as representative of how relationships typically work. A study (Darley & Batson, 1973) conducted at Princeton Theological Seminary with future ministers found that circumstances and typical social behavior was a better predictor than religious ideals like Good Samaritanism. The seminary students were divided into three groups and told they had an important talk to deliver across campus. One group was told they were already late, another had no extra time, and the last had plenty of time. On the way they would encounter a staged event of an individual who was in great distress. Only 10%, 40%, and 60% stopped to help, respectively. It made no difference that half of the students were supposed to be delivering a talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan.

deity that cannot be touched) and one would not be able to give the prisoner anything directly. However, in a sign and act of devotion one might leave a treasured piece of jewelry on the wall outside their cell. This would be sacrificing the property and the imprisoned would have no access to it (like gods), but as a signal of social devotion it could not be clearer. In contemporary times this same social exchange template has been kept; the content has simply been altered. Instead of sacrificing a bull, churchgoers sacrifice some behavior that they find of value such as sex before marriage.²¹

Thus, if someone sees most of the events in their lives within a theological social-causal frame, it is no large step to imagine that their actions matter in a reciprocal manner in relationship to nature and other circumstances outside of the control of natural agencies (because those things would be perceived as under control of a god). The humans in such imagined relationships are granted a psychological safety net by the fact they believe that their behavioral capital can be spent to alter the causal structure of reality. This would be comparable to how a person might feel safer taking a long trip in a jalopy if they have trusted friends who may be called upon in case of a roadside emergency.

Empirical evidence exists to support this conclusion. In less economically developed countries where uncertainty about life is highest there is almost always a high level of religiosity. Even the seeming outliers such as the U.S. (high development and high religiosity) do not disconfirm this hypothesis because the highly capitalistic American society has a relatively sparse

²¹ This isn't to say that there is an easily discernable relationship that is borne out by the data as this model might suggest. In fact, data show that there really aren't major behavioral differences between the pious and secular (Zuckerman, 2008) and may in fact be the reverse of what is commonly believed—at least in some instances. For example, (Edelman, 2009) found that in highly conservative and religious states such as Alabama and Utah consumption of pornography is the highest in the U.S. This is in direct contradiction of the professed moral standards of conservative congregations. However, this does not present a problem for the theory of social and behavioral exchange being worked out here. It is probably very similar in practice to the way that many of us would sincerely tell our mothers that we do not plan to get plastered at a party but we might end up drunk anyway—much like many congregants might profess pornography abstinence to a god but then in the lonely hours of the night fail to keep the promise.

social-economic safety net. This fosters a moderate degree of existential uncertainty (Norris & Inglehart, 2004, pp. 215-241). While economics are not the only factor, it clearly contributes. Thus, in situations where there is low existential certainty people remedy this by turning to the perceived form of control granted by interventionist religion.

Atheist rhetoric, while it may be able to deconstruct notions such as socially responsive events in nature (with varying degrees of success) it cannot offer anything as a replacement. This is why the epigraph originally penned by Darwin was extraordinarily prescient. The intellectuals who came after him and expected religion to die as science and education progressed didn't properly understand the way interventionist religion and gods are conceptualized or all of the factors forming their strength at both the individual psychological level and the rhetorical and societal levels.

*With All of These Shortcomings Outlined for Its Rhetoric, What Are the Future Prospects for
Atheism?*

As mentioned earlier, the recent surge of atheist books and rhetoric that was sparked by Bush era politics and the 9-11 terror attacks was probably as much motivated by the supposed failure of the secularization thesis to come to fruition. As is pointed out by Norris & Inglehart (2004, p. 235), as secular demographics develop, a side effect is slowed population growth in part due to the changing roles of women. In the past century population growth has slowed or stagnated in the most developed countries halting the addition of secular people. Meanwhile, growth has continued or accelerated in the second and third worlds allowing for the multiplication

of very religious people. Thus, proponents of the secularization thesis may have been merely premature, not incorrect. If indeed world demographics and economics allow for all or nearly all countries to develop to Western standards, the secularization thesis may come true in the future—at least in one form or another. At this point though, that is mere speculation. As Taner Edis states: “Current scientific explanations of religion do not encourage any expectation that most people will become scientific naturalists. Supernatural beliefs appear to be too deeply ingrained, too socially useful” (Edis, 2008, p. 213).

Therefore, the prospects for directly changing minds with atheist rhetoric are meager. The causal nature of interventionist religious beliefs is likely to make the core claims unchanging in the face of counterarguments. Atheist rhetoric also lacks many previously outlined features that make interventionist religious rhetoric so effective. It sometimes overlooks the social-causal and heuristic nature of religious beliefs. It lacks the rhetorically effective system of divine command morality as well as a hyper-teleological interpretation of the world. And finally, atheist rhetoric is hamstrung when it comes to positing a social relationship with reality epitomized by interventionist theistic prayer.

Where Does this Leave the Prospects for Theism and Its Rhetoric?

The cognitive processes that religion uses are part of how humans think and are therefore not simply replaced, dismissed, or abandoned. One of the core elements of interventionist religion stems from the application of social-causal frame to mindless events and situations. In this regard the supernatural is very natural and doesn't need much in the way careful rhetoric to persuade. It does, however, need specific environments and rhetorical frameworks to thrive.

Given what has been argued about the nature of interventionist religion and its rhetoric, the following could be a number of rhetorical strategies that interventionist theism can adopt to remain strongly represented in society.

Remain conservative.

As can be gleaned from both casual observation and from demographic data, the congregations and denominations that thrive are those that remain strict (Stark, 2008, pp. 29-36). Mainline protestant denominations such as the United Methodist Church and the Episcopal Church have declined by a total of 49% between 1960 and 2000 while conservative and fundamentalist denominations such as Seventh-day Adventist and Assemblies of God have grown 158% in the same time period in terms of ratio of adherents (Stark, 2008, p. 22). I have already advanced an explanation as to why this may be: since gods are wanted to actually *do* things in people's lives the same people must believe they have behavioral capital to spend with those gods. The easiest way to accumulate lots of behavioral capital is to attempt to adhere to strict behavioral standards. One can hear the clichés echo across a thousand television and movie scripts and through the pages of bad novels everywhere: "But God, I've done good behaviors A, B, and C and refrained from bad behaviors X, Y, and Z—certainly you can grant me this one request!"

Maintain exclusivist rhetoric.

This is really a sub-point of remaining conservative since much of conservatism is maintaining existing social barriers.²² Resistance to things such as homosexual equality can serve as markers for in-group loyalty and out-group distrust (Berreby, 2005). Much as if an individual wanted to ingratiate themselves to a peer who had some particular moral view, they would seek to adopt that same view. For example, one doesn't invite the trust of a pro-life activist by being vocally pro-choice. If you want their favors and help you will bring your views in line with theirs. There is also little to no room for cheating in the imagined relationships like this with deities since gods are often considered all-knowing and hence can know thoughts. Since this is a social system, social issues are very often the most salient:

Under pressures from outside forces, all these issues, especially those involving sexual appearance and behavior, have acquired iconic significance as marking boundaries between 'insiders' and 'outsiders,' the 'community of salvation' and the 'unsaved' people who live beyond its boundaries. Thus, in archetypically Western milieu such as the American high school, Muslim identity defaults to gender segregation, with veiled Muslim coeds holding all-female proms in order to avoid breaking the taboo on sexual mixing. Their evangelical Christian counterparts hold assemblies of promise-keepers, who proclaim their commitments to chastity before marriage and fidelity afterwards. In a pluralistic environment such as America, *all religious groups will use behavioral restrictions as a way of marking the boundaries between believers and non-believers, between us (the saved) and them (the damned)* [italics added]. (Ruthven, 2004, p. 124)

²² Of course this has to be seen as existent on a moving continuum. One cannot be exclusivist to the point of taboo. Overt and open racism, for example, has mostly passed into the realm of taboo. It would not help maintain conservative religious adherence to adopt such extreme exclusivist stances as that. However, non-acceptance of homosexuality is still mainstream enough on the right end of the political spectrum to be a viable stance. By way of illustration, the Mormon's racist stance concerning African Americans was changed in 1978 (Black people and the Latter Day Saint movement, 2011). But—as can be seen in the LDS Church's recent political opposition to gay marriage in California—the issues have simply switched. The trick is to stay on the right end of the spectrum, even as the issues themselves change.

The interesting component is that, as outlined earlier, the views attributed to gods are often just near-mirror reflections of the already existent views held by the individual believer. The believer is often in the situation of gaining behavioral capital that is predicated by none other than their own norms and values. This can help explain the intransigency of extremists like the Phelps family. While some would say that their values and views exist in a social vacuum—that would be inaccurate—at least on a psychological level for them. The Phelps’ views are reflected by their god and their imagined beneficial relationship with him is perceived to outweigh the negative social consequences they may experience in society as a result of their views. Put in such a light, it becomes clear why certain religious groups are often the ones to hold views that are at such variance with wider culture (e.g. Amish culture).

Embedded within the fundamentalist and interventionist religious rhetorical frameworks rest a ready-made rebuttal to arguments counter their positions (or so it is perceived). It is the highly rhetorically effective motive fallacy and although it is pervasive in general, it seems to reside especially comfortably within conservative religious discourse.

Make heavy use of the motive fallacy in exclusivist rhetoric.

How does the motive fallacy work? In its strong form, people can come to believe that if they have ascertained the motivation behind someone’s claim then it has rendered the claim false²³ (for a full discussion see Whyte, 2004, pp. 11-18). For instance, in many verbal relationship squabbles a common accusation is “You’re just saying that because you’re jealous!”

²³ In some ways, this entire thesis could be seen as indulging in the motive or genetic fallacy *if it were my goal to argue for the overall truth or falsity of religious claims*. Rather, I take a naturalistic starting point and try to develop an account of religious rhetoric and cognition. If there is a clear distinction made, there is no reasoning error committed.

The accusation of jealousy may be true, but it doesn't logically bear on the truth of a claim. One can be jealous and say something true or false. In a weaker form the use of this fallacy simply avoids the matter at hand by changing the subject. Political discussions can become dominated in this way. Sometimes even before the merits of a policy can be discussed the conversation has become centered on what motivated the politician to develop the policy. The motive fallacy is often attractive because it *is* helpful in judging the *probability* of the truth of personal claims. Yet relying on it for the entirety of one's argument is fallacious yet rhetorically seductive.

It is used in religious texts and by commentators who like to quote those texts. A favorite creationist rhetorical ploy is to quote Romans 1:18-20²⁴ when scientists have advanced evidence that discounts a literal interpretation of Genesis. Terry Mortenson, an evangelist associated with Answers in Genesis, gives us a highly representative piece of writing:

It is rather the conflict between the *atheistic and deistic interpretations* of God's creation by people who are suppressing the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18-20) versus *sound interpretation* of God's Word by Godly leaders and pastors in the church down through history. (Mortenson, 2010)

The tactic utilized by Mortenson is quite clever. With it creationists are able to accommodate the reactions and responses of scientists and historians without addressing specific claims. The rhetoric is quite effective because once a motivation has been proffered (it is almost always one of negative moral qualities), the conclusion is to dismiss the evidence and arguments contrary to the creationist position.

Portions of the New Testament are certainly not the only religious texts to advance this type of argument. The Koran 43:37 reads: "Devils turn men away from the right path, though

²⁴ Romans 1:18-20 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. (NIV)

they may think themselves rightly guided.” Would you trust someone who was influenced by devils? Would you trust their arguments if you thought they have been influenced by malevolent spirits? Would you accept their motivation at face value when a text you take as authoritative says they are out to sabotage your salvation? Obviously, the answer to all of these is no. That is why the motive fallacy is so effective—it can masquerade as valid reasoning, it can set up moral boundaries, and it can rely on ethos-empowered rhetoric from holy texts.

Stances on social issues and positing malignant motivations behind the beliefs of the *Other* aren't the only aspects that can be utilized for exclusionary rhetoric. Stances on intellectual issues such as science can also reflect this.

Do not “compromise” on issues such as literal exegesis of Genesis.

While the creation and evolution “debate” has a long and storied history in the U.S., creationism is often mischaracterized as persistent because of poor science education (see Eve & Harrold, 1990, pp. 5-6 for discussion). While probably playing a role, poor science education is more than likely not the core reason why creationism persists. To most fundamentalists it is claimed to be matter of scriptural authority. The Answers in Genesis Web site puts it succinctly: “By definition, no apparent, perceived or claimed evidence in any field, including history and chronology, can be valid if it contradicts the scriptural record” (The AiG Statement of Faith, 2009). By unpacking some of the inconsistencies in this position, some of the underlying thought processes that can be revealed which in turn can show why blatant misinformation can be so successful—and why fundamentalist religious leaders will do well to promote it if they value the survival of their brand of religion.

A strictly literalist reading of scripture portrays a geocentric solar system. (See Bane, 2004 and Bouw, 2004 for modern geocentrists.) From the order of creation in Genesis (Earth before Sol) to passages such as Joshua 10:12-13,²⁵ a strict “the Bible means what it says” approach lands creationists in a very inconsistent position when they accept that the bible is literally wrong about the solar system but correct about biology. Why the inconsistency? Besides being a function of the deeper commitment to inerrancy (where literalism is selectively employed), the answer is related to the way social teleology is embedded in the very fabric of interventionist religion. It doesn’t really matter very much in the process of placing events within a social-causal frame if the sun orbits the earth or vice versa. It does matter in this equation, however, if humanity is the result of purposeful, intentional creative actions of a deity or intention-less natural processes. It *is* a consistent epistemic frame to believe that all past events were purposive, intentional, and socially overseen if one asserts that the present operates that way as well. Therein lies the attraction and persuasiveness of creationism—its telic take on causation.

Attempts to reform conservative theology toward a more intellectually respectable position on subjects such as this have been largely unsuccessful for those reasons. The recently established BioLogos foundation is one such attempt. Its founder is none other than prestigious scientist, evangelical Christian, and director of the human genome project Francis Collins (About the BioLogos Foundation, 2010). Judging from the reaction from creationists like Mohler (2010, November 9) these attempts have met with very limited success. The liberalization of the faith is met by conservatives with skepticism and assertions that theology and scripture are more accurate guides to empirical reality than science.

²⁵ Joshua 10:12-13 Then spake Joshua to the LORD in the day when the LORD delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon. And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies. [Is] not this written in the book of Jasher? So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day. (NIV)

The conservative evangelical Protestant world therefore finds itself in a binding circumstance. On the one hand is the road to intellectual respectability but that route may lead to eventual ennui in the congregations and loss of adherents. On the other, it can maintain its stance of often championing pseudoscience while losing more and more intellectual credibility but possibly holding on to attendance figures. To take the lessons from American conservative Protestantism and generalize to other religions can be done, if very cautiously. For instance, the character of creationism in some Islamic countries is very similar, to the point of even directly translating Christian creationist propaganda to serve Turkish Islamic creationism (Edis, 2007, p. 124). The basic mental processes underlying fundamentalist Christian thought are also certainly present in all humans, although cultural and individual variation obviously produces greatly varying differences in expression.

Thus, interventionist theism is more than likely here for the long term. The data and arguments demonstrate that this is a very robust form of religiosity. The rhetorical choices made on interventionist religion's behalf in the future will certainly be influential, but the rhetoric's main strength is that it taps into intuitive processes.

CONCLUSION

NARRATIVE AND SOCIAL FRAMING: SIGNS IN THE SKY AND YOUNG EARTH CREATIONISM

The year is 1995. My cousin and I step off the middle-school bus. The diesel exhaust noise behind us fades down the road. We are walking toward our homes and passing through a field with dry grass crunching under our feet. It is an early fall day with a deep cerulean sky. We continue the conversation we were having on the bus as we walk.

Not wanting to go home just yet, we decide to lie in the dry grass on our backs.

I immediately notice it. In the sky is one of the crosses. It isn't fresh—the contrails are just beginning to fragment—but it is still clearly delineated and that means it counts. That makes it number seven. I try to fit my mind around this.

“Do you see that up there?” I ask him.

“See what?”

“The cross made by the jet-trails.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” he says.

“Do you think it means anything?”

“I don't know. I hadn't really ever thought about it.”

I keep looking up at the trails in the sky. They strike the eye as a long bleached snakeskin slowly being pulled apart and stretched, its scales losing cohesion.

“Do you believe that God talks to people?” I ask.

My cousin takes several moments before answering because he can see that I am serious.

“I’m not sure if it’s exactly like talking—like talking between you and me,” he says.

“Maybe it’s more like just a feeling you get.”

“Yeah, I’ve thought it was like that too. But I have a real specific feeling about these crosses here and I think that it’s God trying to tell me something,” I say.

“Like what?” he asks.

“I feel like God told me that when I saw seven of these crosses in the sky that He’d be coming back then.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like what we have been talking about in youth group. The New World Order and the rising of the antichrist and Jesus coming back and rapturing the saved in a twinkling of the eye and the End Times,” I answer.

“You think that seeing seven of these crosses means that all that stuff is going to happen now?” my cousin asks.

“I’d almost swear to it that God told me as much. I didn’t actually hear a voice or anything, but I have the distinct impression that is what they mean.”

I am still on my back staring up into the sky. Winds were beginning to dissipate the cross.

Needless to say, the rapture hasn't happened yet even though this "message" from God came and went. After seeing the seventh contrail cross and thinking for several days that Christ's return was imminent, I revised my "message from God" to accommodate this disconfirming evidence. I then thought that He had meant it to be seven times seven. (Ah, magic numbers—another rich topic for religious cognition and rhetoric!) Forty-nine contrail crosses came and went and after a few days of imminent expectation, I lost interest. During this time, it never entered my mind that these were random occurrences that had no deeper meaning. I can't help now but see that I was using the same type of thinking used by the Millerites of "Great Disappointment" fame.²⁶

Going back to the findings of the Princess Alice experiment, it seems that I was trying to disambiguate the ambiguous by inserting an agent into the explanation of random events. It was as if I was among the experimental condition since I had been repeatedly primed with the narratives and doctrines of fundamentalist Christianity. My mind reacted to random stimuli by giving it social meaning. At some level I knew that these were simply planes going about mundane flights with their own purposes but it was intuitive to assume that they were intentionally symbolic toward me as well.

The overall purpose of the thesis has been primarily etiological: to first (and briefly) establish that divine causation in the world is more than likely nonexistent and at best an incoherent doctrine. Second, to show how and why such beliefs enjoy a healthy existence in

²⁶ The Millerites were a sect whose leader, William Miller, predicted the second coming of Christ to occur sometime in the year 1843. This year came and went and so a revised and more specific date was issued: October 22, 1844. Thousands of followers, certain of the accuracy of this prediction, sold their belongings or gave them away but midnight on October 23 came leaving them dumbfounded and greatly disappointed, hence the name "Great Disappointment." (Great Disappointment, 2011)

society when they are only weakly warranted. I have been able to demonstrate the underlying cognition in part by looking at the rhetoric employed by believers in select situations and to use the cognition to analyze the rhetoric. Circularity has been avoided by appealing to evidence from evolutionary psychology and social psychology to independently establish these cognitive propensities that lead to specific attributes of religious rhetoric. With that recapitulation, one final illustration will serve to conclude.

While the scientifically minded and literate world has had their universe expand exponentially in the past centuries based on now well-established advancements in scientific knowledge, the universe of Christian fundamentalists (who almost always espouse interventionist theology) has retained the cozy, anthropocentric cosmology not much larger than the Ptolemaic model of the solar system bounded by the stars past Saturn set in a crystalline sphere. The vast 14 billion years of deep cosmic time and more than four billion since Hadean Earth cooled is denied in favor of a miniscule 6,000 years. The interesting question is: why? How are such beliefs that are at complete odds with reality convincing? How can rhetoric in service of such ideas be effective?

The psychological reasons behind the average belief in creationism have to deal with things such as hyperactive teleological reasoning (things in nature have social purpose) and hyperactive understanding of intentionality (things in nature were intentionally designed) (Pyysiainen, 2009; see also Evans, 2000). Take note here that even though these reasons are parsed, they still fall firmly within the social-causal frame. The minute one takes sociality out of the equation, these things no longer have any substance. What is purpose (in the meaningful social sense to humans) outside of social interaction? What is intentionality outside of social bounds? Nonexistent. These cognitive biases that lead individuals to belief in creationism are not easily amenable to rational critique because they are intuitive. Yet this does not explain the

entire picture of the tenacity of creationist beliefs. People are often very open to having their biases corrected in other areas such as visual cognition.

Who hasn't seen a full moon close to the horizon and wondered at its seemingly massive size only to see it "shrink" later that night as it climbs higher in the celestial theater? Some people might attach a mystical significance to this phenomenon but I doubt that when explained that it is an illusion many would continue to dogmatically assert that no, their intuition is correct. Yet this is almost precisely the situation with creationism.

As the previous example showed, people are not automatically forever wedded to their cognitive biases in all situations. Even though cognitive biases can ultimately explain the genesis of many false beliefs about the world, their differing levels of tenacity call for a different level of explanation. This explanation, while still rooted in social cognition, bleeds into the realm of culture and rhetoric.

To illustrate this, it is helpful to recount another creation myth that is not so familiar to Western readers. The creation myth of the Ijaw people from Nigeria begins in a field with a gigantic iroko tree:

Into that field suddenly descended a table with a great pile of dirt on it, a chair, and very large "creation stone." Then, announced by thunder and lightning, Woyengi [the creatrix] came down, sat on the chair, rested her feet on the sacred stone, took the earth from the table, and made the first humans out of it.

These first humans needed life, so Woyengi held them and breathed breath into them, and they gained life. They were neither male nor female, so she ordered each to choose a gender, and they did. Now she asked the new men and women each to choose a way of life and a way of death. So it was that those who chose riches got riches, those who chose children got children, *those who chose to die from smallpox got smallpox, and so forth. All types of lives and types of diseases and other death-bringing activities were chosen on that day* [italics added]. (Leeming & Leeming, 1994, p. 136)

Why would someone willingly choose to die from a horrible disease?²⁷ The answer is that no sane person would choose to die from a disease. Perhaps if forced to choose *some* way to die, one would choose *something*, but certainly not a painful and debilitating disease. The real reason why this myth is constructed in such a manner illustrates the main thrust of my argument: *choosing* a disease gives the gloss of social control to a situation where humans often have very little control (especially in the pre-scientific societal conditions where such myths were formulated). The facts on the ground are that there are many diseases that interrupt human lives and properly understood there is no larger purpose to them. They are merely bacteria or viruses going about their life cycles subjecting humans to their reproductive goals or mistakes in the cellular machinery of the body leading to things such as cancer. There are no social intentions behind diseases. But by positing a mythology where humans *chose* them, a semblance of social control is granted to the situation. *If* there are unsavory facts about the world that cannot be denied, the most palatable option and cognitively constrained manner to deal with and explain them is to place them within the social-causal frame.

The same theme is echoed in the Genesis account. Eve made a *choice* to eat the forbidden fruit and it was through this choice that all manner of evil entered in to the world from thorns to disease to painful childbirth. While I am not denying the subjective and personally valid other interpretations of this myth, for the purposes here the point is that the myth takes the meaningless and hurtful aspects of the world and gives them social meaning. This theme is, of course, retroactively applied much in the same manner that literal belief in Genesis is reinforced; believers interpret present events within the social-causal frame and it follows from this that

²⁷ I recognize the major distinction between humanistic truths derived from interpretation of mythology and the literalist interpretation used by fundamentalists, but in this case I think the distinction is not of importance since *what it means* is essentially the same in both cases.

mythology is plausible in a literal sense because it is operating on the same principles.²⁸ This relationship is reciprocal. Mythic narratives, taken literally, serve to inform how the present is interpreted as well (Hinde, 1999, p. 104).

Creationism here has served as the illustrating example of social framing because it represents a particularly strident case. Humans find our home in an unimaginably large universe that cares nothing about us, indeed *cannot care*, and this is at once both exhilarating and frightening. For those who think the best way forward is to acknowledge this brute fact while allowing it to cast in relief the social aspects of our lives that are real and meaningful—other humans—fundamentalism and interventionist theology can be seen as a hindrance to society. Fundamentalist and interventionist beliefs turn out to be a more accurate representation of the inner world of human social cognition than about the outer world of reality. That said, however, these beliefs are not necessarily the result of ignorance or anything else intellectually irresponsible. Rather, it is a somewhat extreme expression of one of our most human qualities—the urge to live and think and communicate in a social environment. Interventionist religious rhetoric takes the lonely, cavernous mansion of the universe and transforms it into a cozy, small cottage with an all powerful Parent always on call.

²⁸ This is, of course, not limited to the manner in which creationist beliefs are reinforced. Scientifically minded worldviews often take the manner in which the present operates and assume that to be the way in which the past did as well. This doesn't mean the two are equivalently accurate, just that the two similar types of beliefs are operating in the same way in the same brains of the same species.

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