

A JANUS FACE UPON RELIGION FROM SCIENTIFIC MATERIALISM

by *John A. Teske*

Abstract. Bjørn Grinde's article is a Janus face from a scientific insider looking out toward religion and from a religious outsider looking in. His scientific story of the evolutionary and present advantages of religion is laudable but incomplete, as the logic of commitment strategies might provide a fuller account of what produces the value of religious faith. His scientific presuppositions nevertheless might be taken as exhibiting some hubris, particularly in the limits of his instrumental ethics. Finally, the variety and potential incommensurability of both theistic and nontheistic religious views render his distinction between "minimal" and "elaborated" views of God problematic as a route to finding a scientifically credible view by which science might move to optimize the value of religion. Nevertheless, the goal of doing so might be supported by several structural features of religious views, of individual transformation and of hopes for the future, which may be supported by the evolutionary logic of commitment strategies at both individual and group levels.

Keywords: commitment; empiricism; evolutionary adaptation; faith; human universals; irrationality; metaphysics; scientific materialism; supernatural; trust.

Bjørn Grinde's article "How Can Science Help Religion toward Optimal Benefit for Society?" (2005) is a clear exposition from a scientific materialist who has a charitable view of the potential empirical consequences of religious belief, and it provides a perspective on how science might help magnify that value. Like Janus, the god of gates and doorways, Grinde presents the face of a scientific insider looking outward and of a religious outsider looking in. He provides an account of religion as a positive evolutionary adaptation. He suggests that this value might be enhanced by

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distinguishing between an “elaborate” portrayal of God, which may be at odds both with the findings of science and with alternative religious views, and a “minimal” view, which might both avoid scientific fallacies and provide a common ground for religion, the positive practices of which science could contribute to improving. Grinde’s goals are laudable, and the ways in which science might contribute to formulations of religious belief and practice has long been a part of the dialogue between science and religion.

Unfortunately, as a scientific insider, (1) his otherwise marvelous tutorial on the evolutionarily adaptive and current positive contributions of religion does not go far enough. He does make a good case for some of the ethical and practical contributions of religion but does not get to the real essence of why religious *faith* (as more than just a belief in propositional content, whether scientifically falsifiable or not), as a deep expression of our biological nature, might produce both some of the most sublime accomplishments of our species and some of its most diabolical excesses. It also seems (2) that some of his remarks betray an unawareness of the metaphysical presuppositions of science that might be read as hubris.

Since Grinde is an outsider to religion, let us set aside quibbles about the extent to which religion, whether necessarily or empirically, includes “entity” beliefs about God (even in theistic religions) or preaches literal claims that are scientifically fallacious (rather than simply unfalsifiable), or whether informed scientists are likely to have much truck with intelligent-design or anthropic-principle arguments. Still, it seems to me, Grinde’s outsider view (3) does not do service to the range of theistic and nontheistic views, undercutting his hope for a scientifically credible minimal view. The other side of this coin is whether the more elaborated views can be rendered as a matter purely of personal, private concern, despite the contentiousness of whether they might be constitutive of the very benefits he addresses or relevant to public discussion.

FILLING OUT THE SCIENTIFIC STORY

While Grinde acknowledges that religion might simply be a by-product of more “worldly” aspects of the human brain, such as inquisitiveness, a need for explanation, submission, emotional investment in abstract representations, and ritual behavior, he does outline the case for the adaptive value of spirituality per se (though it is not clear whether this requires faith in a divine force). He provides an account of the advantages of religion to reproductive fitness in terms of its role in supporting communal rules of conduct and group cohesion. He also outlines the advantages to individuals, in terms of the reduction of anxiety concomitant to our ability to imagine future events, and the biological advantages of a defense against our awareness of nature’s powers and inevitabilities—a potent survival mechanism indeed. Present advantages would include the strengthening of moral be-

havior, promoting empathy, relieving death anxiety, and answering the need for love and devotion. Grinde argues that it would be worthwhile to exploit an inherent human tendency toward religion, especially if it tunes capacities for sociability and anxiety reduction, and he points out the empirical evidence for the greater health and happiness of religious people. One is left wondering whether this is just arguing for more opium for the masses, regardless of the adaptive value of whatever mechanisms it co-opts.

Fortunately, the evolutionary psychology of moral behavior (Barkow, Cosmides, and Tooby 1992; Buss 1999; Pinker 1997; Wright 1994) provides a more powerful story about the deeper logic that may undergird religious faith as well other human commitments. Randolph Nesse (1999) points out that while kin selection and reciprocity may provide some understanding of moral relationship, even nonzero sum reciprocity (cf. Wright 2000) cannot account for the kind of good provided by deep friendships or life partnerships where help is given even when there is nothing to be gained. Nesse calls it a "commitment strategy" involving a kind of "futures trading" which includes commitments to future actions which would not then be rationally self-interested. Under such circumstances we might realistically hope to get help when we really need it the most, when we are sick, alone, or poor, rather than only when we are able to reciprocate. This is the obverse of the same logic of mutual assured destruction that might well have kept the world from nuclear annihilation during the Cold War generation. Why would we believe that our partners would not, in the end, do what was most rationally self-interested, what would give the maximal cost/benefit gain? We believe that they will act in ways beyond self-interest only if the signals of commitment are accompanied by such irrational displays of emotion that we come to believe they would actually follow through. Given that such commitments can provide goods not otherwise attainable, there may be selective advantages to those able to give and receive them, which would provide an evolutionary shaping of the capacity for passionate, emotional commitment. It would also produce the complicated dance of deceptive versions of such expression, of the detection of such deception, and even of self-deception, that makes our relational lives so poignantly baffling. Nevertheless, our beliefs about the possibility of such commitments are what make them possible; without the ability to give this kind of deep trust, one cannot get it.

Nesse argues that, given the limits of individual humans, communities of individuals may vouchsafe the longer commitments, inevitably and necessarily supported by belief. Hence, there is an evolutionary logic for the deep value of religious commitments, based on faith itself, rather than reasons, as expressions of the truly novel evolutionary good produced by commitment strategies in which faith in the possibility of a greater good is what makes it possible. This logic may be behind the very empirical benefits of religion that Grinde rightly draws to our attention but also behind

the costs of tribalism and conformity that are so dangerous in an interdependent world. Some form of mediation between whatever minimal characteristics we share and the elaborated versions that produce dissension, acrimony, and even violence would seem to be a necessity for our survival.

Questions of human nature are central to the dialogue between religion and science. Evolutionary psychology and its cognate disciplines contribute to a naturalistic understanding of the emergence of human minds, moral systems, and broader human purposes. It may also help us understand apparently unsolvable mysteries as the price for a combinatorial mind capable of generating a virtual reality of language, theory, story, and creative and novel forms of meaningful life. Finally, while evolved psychological mechanisms may make possible the awareness of our finitude, their combined capacities to represent complex and long-term physical and social systems may be part of what drives a curiosity about the inexplicable, even the inconceivable, the inevitable pursuit of which may be at the very heart of religion. So I think there is a fuller and more powerful scientific story that Grinde only begins to provide, which would ultimately support a broader scientific case for the value of religion as a human enterprise without trampling on religious diversity. Religious intolerance, unfortunately, may too often be the other side of religious commitment, but Grinde is right in his worry about throwing out the baby with the bath water.

THE HUBRIS OF SCIENTIFIC MATERIALISM

I will not present, as more than a quibble, the tendency endemic (though not universal) among scientists to extend their concerns into a metaphysical materialism not entailed or falsifiable by science. Even to imply that scientific materialism is somehow epistemically warranted by science is a form of hubris and may be on a par with religious fundamentalism in producing conflict (cf. Barbour 1990). There is no question but that religion is likely to benefit by taking science seriously to the extent that it is, and recognizes itself to be, embedded or manifest within the same natural, material world that science has been so demonstrably successful at understanding. Nevertheless, science is limited primarily to the understanding of causal relationships and repeatable events, which falls far short of exhausting meaning. There may also be epistemic limits to our knowledge of nature, or even ontological limits to nature itself, that science is not equipped to address. Why this is merely a quibble is that, while it does require periodic restatement, most of the scientists involved in this dialogue (except the most recalcitrant) are usually willing to acknowledge it. One nevertheless worries about whether the hermeneutic of suspicion, which is such an important part of scientific skepticism, might not be usefully turned upon science itself.

My more serious, if friendly, concern is with the limitation of an ethics of instrumentality. There is a sad pathos to Grinde's argument in support of religion as a good based on its instrumental value, particularly its value to health. I do not think that this provides an account as to *why* it might have such effects (and the logic of commitment is a plausible one), especially if one does not see faith as exhausted by belief in a set of propositions. Grinde sees the instrumental value of religion in pursuit of particular ends, but this would obviate the possibility that there is in religion any end in itself. Can we understand friendship in terms of its instrumental value, in terms of the kind of cost/benefit analysis that Grinde would apply here? If the value of our friends were entirely instrumental, we really would not have any friends. Nesse (1999) also argues that people who are not socialized with experiences of the trustworthy, or who have repeatedly had their trust betrayed, may not be capable of pursuing commitment strategies. I think that much of the value of religion may be in its capacity to help us see people, our fellows, as ends rather than as means and that its diabolical side may be in sacrificing people to nonhuman ends. Grinde's account of the negative aspects of religion is certainly cognizant of this. I would also agree that religion too narrowly conceived can be and has been used to promote aggression, mislead practitioners about science, and encourage many forms of oppression. But there is nothing about science per se that supports such values. So when Grinde talks about "more intelligent responses," "optimal utility for all humans," and "less knowledgeable societies," he is not likely to find much rapprochement with those who do not share the same values. A concrete and telling example is in his preference that medical interventions (such as abortion and gene therapy), and the ethically based rules about them, be based primarily on input from the medical sciences. While we might agree, in a pluralistic society, that the democratic process might offer the best chance of "adopting sensible policies," it is not clear that medical science has much to say about ethics, whether or not they come from "interpretation of old religious scriptures." That "certain features of some religions are unsuitable for modern societies" may well be true. From the perspective of their adherents, so much the worse for modern societies, whose values they abhor. From whence might come a critique of the abhorrent? Ideally, perhaps from some agreed upon "minimal" view. But how are we to get it?

THE RELIGIOUS AND THE FACES OF GOD

I do not doubt that our orientation toward, our relationship with, and our imaginal responses to unanswerable ontological questions can lead us to direct our attention in different ways to ecological stewardship, social and economic justice, and lives of wholeness and meaning. Certainly some or all of these can be called religious. But Grinde has a rather more restrictive

definition of religion, including beliefs in divine supernatural forces, ethical traditions, and practices offering contact with the putative objects of the beliefs. Even if empirically common, are these features of religion the ones that provide the benefits which he wants science to help optimize?

The problem is that the variety of religious conceptions runs far afield even of the Enlightenment Deism of Grinde's "minimal" face of God, to say nothing of whether such a view is really consistent with science. There are certainly many philosophical views that stand outside this position (for a typology see Hartshorne and Reese 2000). It may be true that, at least in "Christian civilization," the belief in a supernatural force that must violate natural law, and that vouchsafes a personal afterlife, is empirically endemic. Within theological circles, however, there are plenty of positions that would hold that this particular conjunction of beliefs is not even consistent with Christian faith, including recent attempts at reform by such heretical clergymen as John Shelby Spong (1998) and Anthony Freeman (1993). Friedrich Schleiermacher warned against the category of the supernatural at the beginning of the nineteenth century ([1822] 1928). Vatican II theologian Karl Rahner talked of the "infinite mysterious horizon of being that Christians know as God" (1969, 77), and Protestant theologian Paul Tillich called God the "answer to the question implied in human finitude . . . the infinite power of being which resists the threat of nonbeing" (1967, 64). There are even contemporary writers who have proposed a *God without the Supernatural* (Forrest 1996) or a *Christianity without God* (Geering 2002). It is not difficult to construct, from any of these theologies, a "minimal" religion lacking any hint of the "scientifically fallacious." The existence of nontheistic religions like Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, or Jainism would also seem to render problematic a "minimal" face of god.

The other side of the coin is the unlikelihood that many of the more conservative religious would accept much less than a fairly "elaborated" view as "minimal," or relegate it to "a matter of personal, private concern." Unfortunately, across the diversity of world religions, these views produce a plethora of incommensurabilities, alternate conceptions which appeal to irreconcilable ideas of objective, external, and absolute truths. The danger is, as Joyce Carol Oates once put it, "Homo Sapiens is the species that invents symbols in which to invest passion and authority, then forgets that symbols are inventions" (1999, 27). Hence my fear that, in the attempt to make a useful distinction between Grinde's two faces of God, "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold," to put it in William Butler Yeats's poetic words (1970, 73). I do share Grinde's concern that many religious differences "seem futile and destructive" and dearly hope that progress can be made, whether theologically or religiously (and believe that most of the major religions have some awareness built into them of the dangers of idolatry, hubris, and human depravity as well as of the risks of self-deception), in recognizing our species-wide and ecology-embedded interdepen-

gency. Otherwise, to continue with Yeats, we had best ask “what rough beast, its hour come round at last,/ Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?” (p. 73) Unfortunately, it is as likely that religion will direct us to an *Armageddon* as to a *City of God*, and one fears that the help that the religious might want from science is as likely to be better satellite transmission, better thought-influencing techniques, and better weaponry to fight their perceived oppressors.

MINIMAL RELIGION AND HUMAN UNIVERSALS

We are still left with several valuable insights. The first, from Grinde’s Janus face of the religious outsider looking in, is in seeing the empirical value, an overall positive cost/benefit ratio for religion, and an encouragement to find a commonality, commensurate with science, by which this value might be magnified. The second, from his Janus face of the scientific materialist looking out, is to look for the evolutionary adaptiveness of religion, especially its present advantages, since such knowledge might enable us to help produce optimal benefit.

What is shared between religions, which contributes to their empirical value, may well not be some minimal “face of god,” given the range of possibilities, the incommensurabilities between them, and the difficulties mediating between them. A minimal view that looks too much like the null set is not likely to be at all satisfactory for any of the more elaborated positions, the latter of which are not likely to be relegated to private concerns. Perhaps this should be no surprise, even from within Christianity, given the sad history of painful deaths chosen or imposed for the sake of futile doctrines long since eroded. There is certainly no paucity of contemporary sects that believe their small sliver to be in possession of The One True Faith. Finding a common God may seem reasonable under a liberal ideology of diversity and tolerance, but it is at odds with many an inquisition. It may even be true, as the title of Loyal Rue’s most recent book (2004) proclaims, that *Religion Is Not about God*.

My personal favorite is a passage from Rumi (1200 C.E.) about the stages of religion:

In the first stage man worships the sun, the moon, and other things.
 In the second stage he worships God.
 In the third stage he does not say he worships God
 and he does not say that he does not worship God.

I am always tempted to add a fourth, where he may say he worships God and he may say he does not worship God, depending upon what those he is talking to mean by “God”—but this hardly gets us the minimal commonality that Grinde seeks.

In fact, Grinde’s argument does provide some hints, not only *that* religion has empirical value but *why*. Religion addresses the deepest needs of

human life, our fascination with mystery, the limits of our knowledge, our origin and place in the universe, and our anxieties about death and non-being. Contra postmodern relativism, one of the more important contributions of thinking about human evolution is the identification of *human universals* that provide the envelope for individual development and cultural history. Theological content notwithstanding, there are at least two structural features which seem to hold across religious belief systems.

One is the possibility of individual transformation. Whether you call it enlightenment, conversion, *metanoia* (change of mind; repentance), *gnosis kardias* (knowledge of the heart), or simply a "leap of faith," this capacity for deep shifts in belief, even where these require imaginative leaps into the unknowable, is something to which our understanding of evolutionary biology can contribute. It is neither merely the nonzero sum advantages of reciprocal relationships nor the possibility of belief producing self-fulfilling prophecies, but the "futures trading" in strategies of commitment, which bring about heretofore unknown goods. They do this by virtue of our being able to trade commitments to future actions that would not be in our rational, cost/benefit, individual interest to pursue if those future circumstances occurred. But there is a vast span of our cognitive and emotional lives that is about our forming and maintaining these deeper forms of relationship. They are rooted, finally, in trust and require a leap of faith in both our own and our partners' irrational emotions, by virtue of which we can obtain real goods and real advantages not otherwise obtainable. The extent that religious belief encourages, vouchsafes, and supports such commitments may be part of its empirical value, but religious beliefs themselves require the same leaps, taking us beyond what we know or can possibly know.

The second structural feature, related to and unpacked by the same logic as the first, is the formation of communities of commitment who support and monitor individual commitments and can, at a group level, do the same kind of "futures trading" of commitments. Communities of commitment also have their own larger purposes, directions, and hopes for the future. This socially supported faith in the future may well be one of the empirically most important contributions of being religious, producing a range of future goods for our species that may not be possible without it. Or it may not. These are, after all, outcomes about which we cannot know, which may be unlikely, and about which it may well be irrational to hope; but it may be that they are not brought about otherwise. Hope for such outcomes provides support for our faith in an imaginative world, even if we know that they are products of our imagination, and hope that, even if our efforts are unlikely to succeed, they are not destined to fail, and if the world they portend is possible, it may be worthwhile to spend one's life in its pursuit.

Can science help us, the religious of whatever stripe, to optimize the benefits in empirically measurable ways? Let us hope so; but some self-conscious understanding of how such commitments, by individuals or communities, really work, in a real world in which we have material being, may also be part of this understanding.

Thank you, Bjørn Grinde, for your stimulus to our thinking. I have faith that we will be talking again.

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