For God and Country, Not Necessarily for Truth: The Nonalethic Function of Superempirical Beliefs

Abstract

Religious beliefs, it has been noted, are often hard to disprove. While this would be a shortcoming for beliefs whose utility was connected to their accuracy, it is actually necessary in the case of beliefs whose function bears no connection to how accurate they are. In the case of religions and other ideologies that serve to promote prosocial behaviour this leads to the need to protect beliefs systems against potentially disruptive counterevidence while maintaining their relevance. Religions turn out to be particularly adept at this because of the use they make of existing cognitive by-products to make them plausible without exposing them overly to investigation.

I

When a group of humans sets out to hunt an animal—a stag, perhaps—a range of beliefs is necessary to make success at all likely. First, the hunters must have beliefs concerning such matters as the probable location of their prey, its likely behaviour and the lay-of-the-land in the area of the hunt. In addition, they must also believe that the other hunters are trustworthy, that they themselves will be punished if they do not cooperate with the rest of the group or, perhaps, that hunting with the others is their only opportunity to obtain food.

The two sets of beliefs differ in one fundamental respect. The first set must be accurate in order for the hunt to have a reasonable chance of success. If reality diverges in significant ways from what the hunters believe in this respect, their prey will elude them. This is not the case with the second set of beliefs, however. It does not matter whether the other

hunters really are generally trustworthy, whether punishment awaits the defectors, nor whether there are other effective means for obtaining food. All that matters is that the hunters hold such beliefs to the degree sufficient to motivate them to cooperate for the period of the hunt. So, it may be that one of the hunters believes the other to be a paragon of virtue while that other is a scoundrel who merely fears some future retribution. So long as they cooperate, the truth of the matter need not enter into the picture and the hunt may well be a success. As we will see, it is highly significant that the situation becomes more complex when repeated hunts are considered but, at each point, the basic point holds.

Drawing upon the distinction sketched in this example I will claim that while most beliefs generally have to be at least partly accurate to lead to effective actions, the role of some beliefs is such that it does not matter whether they are accurate, i.e., their function is nonalethic. The reason is that these beliefs tend to be only indirectly connected to choice of actions as they motivate the desire to cooperate rather than determining the precise manner this cooperation ought to take. I will argue that ideologies are paradigmatic of these kinds of beliefs in the way that they motivate prosocial behaviour by claims that need not be accurate. As pointed out by McKay and Dennett, however, such beliefs have the problem of maintaining their stability in the face of potential counterevidence—people must generally believe them to be true in order to act upon them. Rather than showing that ideologies are impossible, this merely means that they must be protected against counterevidence. The degree to which they have been protected against potential investigation—rendered superempirical—depends upon three factors: the content of the beliefs being hard to falsify, the available empirical methods being inadequate and, perhaps most importantly, the social context being such as to make investigation unlikely. Religions are to be understood as a particularly successful type of ideology. This is because many of their claims are particularly hard to investigate while being rendered all the more plausible by the cognitive biases that make human minds highly susceptible to all supernatural beliefs.[1]

II

The distinction to which the hunting example draws attention can be generalised. On the one hand, there are beliefs whose function is tied to

their truth or accuracy. Talk of function of beliefs is used here to make the point that, ultimately, this discussion is to be tied back to cultural evolution and the different ways beliefs turn out to be adaptive in that context. However, the main conclusions could be phrased in terms of the more vaguely understood role played by the beliefs. On the other, there are the beliefs whose function has no such connection, and such beliefs will be referred to as having *nonalethic function*. A belief whose function (or role) is nonalethic serves this function just as well regardless of the degree to which it is accurate, unlike the majority of beliefs whose inaccuracy could negatively impact their functionality. This is a pragmatic as well as an ontological issue. Its connection to epistemic issues such as the plausibility of such beliefs is less than simple, as we will see.

In the example above, a hunter's belief that the failure to cooperate with the other hunters would be punished by their chieftain has the nonalethic function of ensuring the hunter's cooperation during the hunt. What the chieftain actually does following the hunt clearly can not affect whether that particular hunt was a success—that would require a cause to occur after the effect. It is just the hunter's belief in future punishment that partly determines the success of the hunt. Of course, the chieftain's past willingness to punish defectors does influence how hunters perceive their situation in future hunts, but always in a 'backward looking' direction. The past punishments are evidence for the chieftain's future willingness to punish—the belief in that willingness and not the willingness itself being the factor driving the behaviour. Where the belief in future punishments can be maintained without experience of prior punishments, the chieftain's actual propensities become irrelevant.

While the distinction under consideration is really between functions rather than beliefs, certain kinds of beliefs are more apt to have nonalethic function than others. One vital factor is how directly the beliefs shape individual actions. When someone is asked for directions to the nearest petrol station, their beliefs concerning the location of that station will directly determine whether they point one way or another, assuming they choose to cooperate. Obviously, the usefulness of the instructions they provide will depend upon the accuracy of their beliefs in this respect. There may be cases where inaccurate beliefs will, nonetheless, turn out to be useful; but these cases will be unusual. The beliefs that do motivate people to cooperate, however, only affect people's behaviour indirectly;

given that one wishes to cooperate, detailed beliefs regarding the petrol station are still necessary to determine which way to point. This is why the basis for agreeing to cooperate may be mistaken and yet the cooperation may be effective. It is no accident that all of the hunters' beliefs that had to be accurate concerned the details of the hunt, while those that could have nonalethic function all lay at the bottom of their willingness to hunt together.

Reflective of this connection, belief systems referred to as ideologies have typically had the nonalethic function of motivating cooperation. The point can be made using the example of communism. One of the ways in which communism motivated people to cooperate was by promising them a proletarian utopia. Whether such a utopia was actually achievable did not determine the degree to which communism was effective in motivating cooperation. What did determine the effectiveness of communist ideology was the degree to which people were willing to believe in it and, in effect, were willing to act upon it. In this respect communism was very successful for several decades at least. Millions of people, both within communist countries and outside of them, came to honestly believe in the ability of communism to reshape the world and were willing to devote a great amount of effort in what they saw as the cooperative effort to bring about the desired proletarian utopia. Similar points could be made about many of the ideologies that have had greater or lesser success over the years including fascism and the various species of nationalism specific to particular national identities.

Significantly, the point is not that ideologies have necessarily all misrepresented the world but that their effectiveness in maintaining the cooperation of their adherents did not rely on the truth of their claims—a belief with nonalethic function does not automatically mean a false belief. At the same time, in so far as the interests of individual members of a group identifying with a particular ideology did not completely coincide with the interests of the group, that group would benefit from the ideology's ability to incorrectly convince the members that their interests did align with those of the group. Furthermore, there are many more ways for beliefs to be false than to be true, making it highly unlikely that randomly chosen beliefs that have a nonalethic function turn out to be correct.

III

Yet, in the end, communist ideology lost its appeal. By the end of the Soviet Bloc in the nineteen eighties, there were relatively few real adherents to that ideology within the borders of the Warsaw Pact countries or, indeed, outside of them. At the same time, while mainland China has retained the trappings of a communist country, the policies it has pursued have become far more capitalist in most respects. Less than a hundred year after the October Revolution there are only a handful of minor nations in which something resembling a communist state actually persists. Without getting into the details of history, it seems highly plausible that the failure of communist ideology to provide the utopias it forecast played a major role in its eventual downfall. People have a limited willingness to act on claims they do not think literally true or at least likely enough to be true. It seems not enough for most people most of the time that a particular claim has nonalethic value; they must actually think it accurately describes the situation. So, for an ideology to be effective at motivating behaviour it must be believed in. But over time the evidence against the truth of communist claims mounted up to a degree that few proved able to ignore. To the degree that adherence was maintained it probably had more to do with the fear of potential repercussions, as evidenced by the Eastern Bloc's ultimate rapid collapse once the fear of Soviet intervention was removed by Gorbachev.

It may, on this basis, be argued that false beliefs are too unstable to support function. Indeed, this is precisely the line taken by McKay and Dennett (2009). Their argument is that for any belief to be able to support a function it must be stable and that false beliefs are subject to falsification, rendering them incapable of maintaining a function in the long term. Of course, as already pointed out in the case of communism, 'the long term' may be longer than the lifetimes of most people—to echo Keynes's famous quip. This does not mean that McKay and Dennett's point can be altogether disregarded, by any means. It is true that, *ceteris paribus*, false beliefs are less stable than true ones. In so far as people hold truth to be an epistemic norm, are only willing to act upon beliefs that they themselves hold to be true, and have some capacity to tell the difference between truth and falsehood, a false belief is at least potentially open to

destabilisation by counterevidence. This does not automatically mean that incorrect beliefs cannot maintain a great measure of stability. It does mean, however, that for such stability to be attained, they must be protected against potential counterevidence. As it happens, there is quite a lot that can be done to achieve this.

McKay and Dennett bring up the story of the boy who cried wolf and due to his lies was quickly no longer trusted. Yet, what if the people in the story lacked the means to independently verify the boy's claims or were unwilling to carry out such investigations for some reason? In such a situation, the whole village might have maintained the belief that each time the boy warned of the coming of the wolf it was only due to their timely intervention that no sheep were lost. The point can be generalised to identify three kinds of considerations that can determine whether a belief is *superempirical*, i.e. protected against the possibility of empirical counterevidence (Talmont-Kaminski 2009a; Talmont-Kaminski 2009b), these being the content of that belief as well as its methodological and social contexts.[2]

Content

The most obvious way in which a claim can be protected against potential counterevidence is for it to say very little that is open to investigation in the first place or to say something that will make such investigation unlikely. Thus, ambiguity and vagueness are preferable to precision—the multiply reinterpretable predictions of various soothsayers come to mind. But, also, it is better to make claims that concern distant times and places rather than anything local—gods and dragons tend to live atop the highest mountains. Finally, investigation may be discouraged if the claims include information about the horrid effects that anyone foolish enough to investigate their truth is likely to suffer—both gods and dragons are infamous for not welcoming uninvited visitors.

Methodological context

The other side of this consideration is the issue of what resources are available to potentially investigate the claims. The progress of science and epistemic methodology in general has been no friend to nonalethic function in this regard, as it has made possible the investigation of claims that seemed previously beyond the scope of any inquiry—Comte's infamous

claim that the chemical make-up of the distant stars would never be known providing just one example. Significantly, it is not enough that the relevant methodological means to investigate a claim be developed. They must also be available. Where such means are understood by few and their results valued by few others, their impact is likely to be minimal.

Social context

Perhaps the most interesting consideration that determines how open to investigation a claim is does not necessarily have anything to do with its content, however. Social norms can make investigation highly unlikely by one of two general means. First, the claims in question can be given a special status such that questioning them is held to be socially unacceptable and may even carry with it the threat of social stigmatisation. This may take the form of particular taboos or just the general idea that the ideology in question is considered sacred and therefore "set apart and forbidden" (Durkheim 1912). Where investigation has been undertaken, the results may be disparaged on the grounds that those who obtained them broke those social norms. Second, the social context may limit the development or availability of epistemic methodology, thereby interfering with people's general ability to investigate claims.

Boudry (2011, 101ff) also considers a number of features that can render elements of belief systems less subject to potential investigation. These include examples of equivocation, post hoc reinterpretation, conspiratorial thinking, and so forth. While the classification he uses cuts across the one used here, it is not in disagreement with the points made in this paper but, in fact, helps to spell out the various mechanisms that can protect nonalethic function. The general point, it seems, is that while there a number of distinctions to be valuably made in the various mechanisms that serve to protect claims from potential destabilisation, ultimately, the value of the distinctions is in helping to spell out how the various mechanisms interact.

IV

It is important to note that the view of the epistemic behaviour of humans assumed here is intermediate between the hyperrationalist

account of people as always appropriately regulating their beliefs on the basis of the available evidence and the antirationalist view that people do not take evidence into account at all. While those extremes might possibly be true of some individuals (unlikely though that is) the vital point is that if we look at a human community in general, the existence of counterevidence for a particular view does provide a potential source of destabilisation of that view, rather than a straightforward falsification or, at the other extreme, being deemed irrelevant by that community. This means that any way in which that counterevidence is rendered less likely to become available or influential may potentially help to maintain the stability of a claim that has nonalethic function.

The point is connected to another aspect of the account being developed that needs to be made explicit. It is often suggested that 'useful fictions', among other cultural phenomena, require a conscious conspiracy to develop and maintain them. This view is based upon a failure to understand the capacity for cultural evolution to shape human belief systems into stable forms without any intentional guidance by individuals or groups and, as such, its persistence is akin to the continued attractiveness of creationist accounts, caused as that is in part by a failure to appreciate the strength of evolutionary theory. Given a range of cultures that include a variety of belief systems that vary in respect of the degree to which they help to maintain the cohesion of those cultural groups, the groups whose cohesion is greater will tend to outcompete the other groups, as will their belief systems. This is merely a statement of cultural group selection as applied to ideologies. Here, as in the case of other evolutionary phenomena, blind variation, selection, and retention form the basis for what most often turns out to be an explanation that is much more plausible than the alternatives. To put it in simple terms, it is not just that evolution is smarter than us, it is smarter than any group of co-conspirators.

There is another way to think about the relation between evidence and nonalethic function. In the case of beliefs whose functionality is dependent upon their truth or accuracy, it makes pragmatic sense to attempt to attain something resembling truth. By increasing the accuracy of such beliefs, after all, we are likely to be increasing their functionality. This is not the case with nonalethic function, however. When dealing with nonalethic function, limiting ourselves to beliefs that accurately represent

reality is actually likely to eliminate the most functional beliefs. This is as true in the case of the truth and accuracy of such beliefs as for any other requirement this is unconnected to their function. We could, after all, just as well be choosing beliefs with nonalethic function on the basis of how well they fit the iambic pentameter as on their accuracy. By limiting the influence of considerations of accuracy that would otherwise naturally loom large it is possible to allow the functionality of such beliefs to come into its own and to determine their popularity through cultural evolutionary processes.

David Sloan Wilson, in his discussion of the prosocial role of religion (Wilson 2002, 228), distinguishes between factual and pragmatic realism. While many religious beliefs fail as literal descriptions of the world and therefore are not good examples of 'factual realism', they are behaviourally adaptive and thereby 'pragmatically realist' according to him. While the distinction as Wilson makes it is highly problematic (Talmont-Kaminski forthcoming), it does allow him to make the claim that the popularity of religious beliefs is not due to their truth but to the increased success of the cultural groups that held those beliefs. At the same time, groups which rejected religious beliefs because of their lack of factual realism would have been selected against. The preponderance of religious cultures was the result, Wilson holds.

V

It may be useful to consider the example of nationalism at some length. This will help us to see how ideologies protect themselves against investigation as well as to understand the limitations they are faced with.

The prosocial function of nationalism seems relatively obvious. This is not to claim that it is not the case that nationalist feelings have never been used for private gain—far from it. However, the primary function of the various forms of nationalism that have spread around the world over the last couple of hundred years appears to be tied to maintaining the cohesion of nation-states that are much larger than the local communities that people have traditionally identified with. Sometimes, as in the case of the young United States of America, this had to be achieved in the face of the further difficulty that the national identity could not even be based upon a single shared ethnic or even cultural background. Typically, this

required that the nation be represented as an entity that was simultane-ously more homogenous than it really was and far more different from other nations than was the case—American 'exceptionalism' is quite typical of nationalist views. This was necessary to create a clear distinc-tion between the in- and out-groups, allowing for them to be differentially valued.

The previously provided list of the three kinds of considerations that determine the degree to which a claim is open to investigation applies, of course, to nationalism. In terms of content, nationalist claims often present the kind of vague profile to be expected of ideologies. It is, for example, routinely claimed that 'United States is the greatest'—a claim vague enough to avoid almost any counterevidence, as pointed out by the schoolyard quip 'The greatest what?' Where more precise, the claims might concern something like a general national character that withstands comparison against individual cases on the basis that 'people differ', the no-true-Scotsman retort, or just through an unwillingness to bring the specific knowledge to bear upon the general claims. Finally, nationalist ideologies tend to have a historical aspect in which the complexities of historical interactions between various groups of individuals that form, reform, and interpenetrate are simplified to fit into the nationalist narra-tive. Such historical narratives are often very effective since a modicum of accurate historical knowledge is necessary to appreciate the way in which they misrepresent actual history.

What has probably made nationalism even more effective is that sci-entific understanding of the way in which nationalist ideologies function has been sorely lacking until recent times. This is because the social sci-ences have been relatively late to develop, having to deal as they do with particularly complex phenomena that do not easily allow modelling using relatively simple tools. Also, the strength of nonscientific preconceptions has hobbled the development of a scientific understanding of social phe-nomena as well as the propagation of this understanding throughout the broader public. This has meant that the tools necessary to appreciate the nonalethic nature of ideologies were often missing, so that the method-ological context has been favourable to nationalist ideologies.

The most vital role in maintaining nationalist ideologies has been played, however, by a very protective social context. One simple aspect of that context has been the use of adherence to nationalist claims and

respect for nationalist symbols as an indicator of belonging to a particular national in-group. This has the effect that critique of these claims becomes equivalent to rejecting this identity, with potentially very high costs to the individual. As a result, adherence to the nationalist ideology comes to be enforced on the individual level. Two points can be raised relative to this example. The first is that such claims and symbols must be arbitrary to be effective at signalling belonging to a particular in-group. The point can be made using the example of national flags. Were it not the case that there is little objective difference between flags, certain flags might be preferable on an objective basis that is independent of what they symbolise. This might lead to people preferring certain flags on that basis, undermining their effectiveness as indicators of belonging to a particular group. Analogously, nationalist claims should not have a function tied to their truth as that would render certain nationalist claims preferable. The second point to be made is that such arbitrary symbols seem more likely to be essential for nations such as the United States which lack the kind of historical roots which provide alternative indicators of belonging. A Frenchman who rejects everything about the modern French nation would most probably be still thought of as French due to their language, culture, and ancestors. An American in a similar position, however, may well be told 'If you don't like it, you can leave'.

VI

We have, thus far, limited ourselves to considering secular ideologies. Yet it is not they that have held the human imagination for most of history, but religious traditions whose sway was incomparable and ubiquitous until recent times. This raises two questions: Why have secular ideologies been less powerful than religious belief systems until recent times? And, what is the relationship between religions and ideologies? To come to grips with both these questions it is best to start by considering the kinds of problems that secular ideologies face.

The difficulties faced by ideologies can be thought of in terms of what it is that stabilises and destabilises such beliefs within the belief systems of the individual adherents as well as within the culture as a whole. Starting with the destabilising factors, it is not the case that even the most effective measures to avoid counterevidence are completely suc-

cessful at eliminating the influence of empirical issues upon ideologies. Thus, in the case of the nationalist example, travel offers a means by which such ideological assumptions can come face to face with the reality of other nations. Extensive international links developed within the European Union, in part for this very purpose, have made stark nationalist ideologies difficult to sustain, though they have by no means eliminated them. More generally, claims to nationalist superiority do come under pressure when faced with tangible evidence of the downgrading of the nation's status. Of course, often the immediate reaction is for the ideological commitments to be reinforced, as suggested by the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956), but in the longer term some sort of allowance has to be made for the changed circumstances requiring, at the very least, a reinterpretation of the previously held claims (Zygmunt 1972; Melton 1985). If this were not the case, there would be no need to shield ideologies against counterevidence and humans would be utterly lacking in capacity for evaluating claims empirically.

The other side of the story consists of the considerations that drive people to hold ideological claims. We have thus far discussed these in terms of the functional role of these claims but there is also the question of the mechanisms involved—an important distinction made by Tinbergen (1963). What is more, while people do not generally hold to the principle of Ockham's Razor that only such entities should be believed in as are necessary to explain what is known to be the case, they do express a certain economy of beliefs in that they generally do not come to hold beliefs unless they think at some level that there is a reason to hold those beliefs.[3] It has been suggested that this primarily involves assessment of the relevance of the potential belief (Sperber and Wilson 1995; Boyer 2002) but, once again, it would be a mistake to completely discount epistemic evidence.

The considerations that undermine ideological claims and those that motivate those claims put conflicting pressures upon the content of those claims. As we have already observed, claims that have little impact upon what is close and readily interacted with are much less open to undermining. However, such claims are also much less likely to be perceived as relevant enough to warrant remembering and passing on to others in the society. To be successful, ideologies must navigate between these two

problems. This will mean making claims that leave little scope for investigation but nonetheless are felt to be worth remembering and passing on to others. It is this that religions have traditionally achieved and the reason why they have been so successful.

The claims deemed to lie at the core of the major religions leave very limited scope for empirical evaluation, as has been observed numerous times. What has not been noted, and what is one of the main points of this article, is that this is only to be expected due to the cultural evolution of belief systems whose function is not truth-related. Comparing religions to secular ideologies, it seems clear that the latter are much more open to potential investigation—communism was seen to fail to lead to a proletarian utopia but heaven still awaits. Religions can afford to distance their contents from potential investigation thanks to supernatural claims being particularly successful in spreading within a culture, i.e., being cognitively optimal. The reason for this is that, as has been investigated by Pascal Boyer and numerous others, supernatural claims make extensive use of pre-existing cognitive by-products (see, for example, Boyer 2002). Indeed, while it has proved very difficult to provide a definition of the supernatural in ontological terms, it could well be defined as the concepts that human culture gives rise to when unconstrained by the need to accurately represent reality—the content of supernatural claims serving to mirror the idiosyncrasies of the human mind and human relations. Thinking back to our original example of the hunters, an especially effective threat enforcing cooperation would be the potential ill-will of forest spirits whose knowledge of any misdeeds and ability to exact punishment could be believed to be particularly extensive.

There is another way of putting this central point. There are a great many possible superempirical concepts that people could believe in. However, only a small subset of these appears plausible to humans. The characteristics this subset of superempirical concepts shares are largely a reflection of the particular cognitive biases that reliably form in human minds. This means that such concepts come to be easily accepted by humans. It is instructive to compare these concepts with the kinds of concepts that have been produced by modern science and which require specialised training and sources of evidence as well as dedicated institutions in order to be maintained within human cultures (McCauley 2011). Because of their attractiveness, any belief system that relies upon super-

natural concepts is at an inherent advantage that can be difficult to over-come. A belief system with a nonalethic function is a natural match for supernatural concepts since both need to maintain a superempirical status to remain stable.

When we consider the example of Christianity we can see two further strategies which are used by at least some religions to deal with the dilemma outlined above. First, the perceived relevance of religious claims is augmented by supernatural threats or inducements. Thus, in the case of the Catholic Church, the future promise of heaven and hell can be under-stood in part as a means to increase the relevance of the religion's claims. Of course, this strategy can only function where there is some existing level of belief in the claims. Second, while the central dogmas identified by Christian theology are often highly remote, popular forms of Christian belief usually put a much greater focus on claims that are of much more immediate relevance—one aspect of a general phenomenon known as the-ological incorrectness (Slone 2004). These claims are often magical in nature as, for example, is the case with the belief in the power of prayer to affect miraculous cures. By distancing themselves from such cases without actually rejecting them, church authorities are in the comfortable position of being able to use, for example, Catholic miracle centres such as Lourdes and Medjugorje to motivate religious feeling among the faith-ful while suffering little if the magical claims end up being rejected.

We can now understand the relationship between religions and secular ideologies as well as why religions have traditionally been much more successful. An account that has at times been opposed to the cogni-tive by-product account of religion presents it as a prosocial adaptation. Wilson (2002), one of the main proponents of the prosocial account, con-siders the way in which the religious rules of such communities as Calvinist Geneva led to their worldly success. He also discusses the example of Jain ascetic monks who, even though their interests appear to be individual and otherworldly, serve to act as a form of a morality police that maintains high levels of prosocial behaviour among other Jain. The monks cannot prepare their own food but can only eat food prepared in Jain households considered pure—the social status connected to the feeding of the monks helping to maintain the prosocial behaviours neces-sary for a household to be deemed pure.[4]

Given that this prosocial function of religious claims is not tied to their truth, the prosocial adaptation account clearly identifies religions as

a subset of what I have been calling ideologies. The two accounts, however, need not be seen as conflicting. Indeed, the way I have presented them here, they are complementary—the cognitive by-products make it easier for religions to maintain the necessary stability to support prosocial function. In effect, religions can be understood as magical ideologies, combining the characteristics of ideologies and of magical belief systems (Talmont-Kaminski forthcoming). It is due to their ability to recruit magical beliefs to motivate prosocial behaviour that religions have been particularly successful in the past. This presents religion in terms of a dual (genetic/cultural) inheritance model—an approach that has been gaining favour recently (Talmont-Kaminski 2009b; Atran and Henrich 2010).

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NOTES

1. Some of the arguments presented here are also discussed in (Talmont-Kaminski forthcoming). They have been presented in a range of fora—in particular during talks at Ghent, Belgium, and Birmingham, Alabama—and have benefitted from numerous comments and suggestions, for which the author is most grateful.

2. Because of the significance of the methodological and social context in determining whether a belief is effectively open to investigation, a belief may be superempirical even if it would not be considered unfalsifiable.

3. Clearly, what may be thought to be sufficient grounds to hold a belief is far from what might satisfy within the context of a philosophical or scientific discussion. Also, any justification that is provided may well, of course, involve a post hoc explanation which is only produced in response to questioning. Finally, beliefs, just like many other mental contents such as memories and perceptions are typically constructive and not to be thought of in terms of the permanent contents of a belief-box. Even so, none of this removes the need to characterise the mental mechanisms responsible for people's acceptance of certain claims.

4. David Sloan Wilson sometimes uses the term 'stealth religions' to identify nonreligious ideologies.

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