

ACREDITAR EM DEUS É UMA HIPÓTESE (CIENTÍFICA)?

IS BELIEF IN GOD A (SCIENTIFIC) HYPOTHESIS?

MIKAEL STENMARK (*)



(*) Mikael Stenmark is Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Uppsala University, Sweden. His research focuses on religious pluralism, theism, naturalism, relativism, scientism, and the science-religion dialogue. Stenmark's books include *Naturalism and Beyond: Religious Naturalism and Its Alternatives* (Lueven: Peeters, 2016), *The Customization of Science: The Impact of Religious and Political Worldviews on Contemporary Science* (Palgrave, 2014), *How to Relate Science and Religion: A Multidimensional Model* (Eerdmans, 2004), *Environmental Ethics and Environmental Policy Making* (Ashgate, 2002), *Scientism: Science, Ethics and Religion* (Ashgate 2001), and *Rationality in Science, Religion and Everyday Life* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). He holds a PhD in philosophy of religion from Uppsala University.

e-mail: mikael.stenmark@teol.uu.se

Resumo

Crenças são adquiridas, revisadas ou rejeitadas tanto na ciência, quanto na religião. Na ciência, isso ocorre principalmente quando cientistas propõem hipóteses, testam-nas mediante evidências disponíveis, chegando assim a um veredito sobre qual das hipóteses rivais seria a mais bem justificada. A questão que quero abordar neste artigo é se deveríamos proceder da mesma forma na religião – seja porque esse é o modo que as coisas já são feitas, ou porque esse é o modo que as coisas deveriam ser feitas, não importa a prática vigente.

Palavras-chaves: Ciência, Religião, Hipótese, Dawkins, Plantinga, Clayton.

Abstract

Beliefs are acquired, revised or rejected in both science and religion. In science this primarily occurs when scientists propose hypotheses, test them against available evidence, and then come to a verdict about which one among the rival hypotheses is best justified. The question I want to address in this essay is whether we should proceed in the same way in religion – either because this is actually the way things are done already, or because it is the way things should be done, no matter what the current practice is.

Keywords: Science, Religion, Hypothesis, Dawkins, Plantinga, Clayton.

Beliefs are acquired, revised or rejected in both science and religion. In science this primarily occurs when scientists propose hypotheses, test them against available evidence, and then come to a verdict about which one among the rival hypotheses is best justified. The question I want to address in this essay is whether we should proceed in the same way in religion – either because this is actually the way things are done already, or because it is the way things should be done, no matter what the current practice is. In religion, I shall narrow my focus to belief in God and put aside other types of religious beliefs. So the question to be addressed is: “Is belief in God a hypothesis or, at least, should belief in God be treated as a hypothesis?” Further, is it, or should it be, taken to be a scientific hypothesis?

Richard Dawkins thinks that the answer to that last question is a simple yes. He maintains that the belief “that there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us” is a scientific hypothesis which, in principle might be confirmed, but which actually is refuted by science.¹ He calls this hypothesis the “God hypothesis”. Moreover, he says that: “You can’t escape the scientific implications of religion. A universe with a God would look quite different from a universe without one. A physics, a biology where there is a God is bound to look different. So the most basic claims of religion *are* scientific. Religion *is* a scientific theory.”² He further clarifies that:

I pay religions the compliment of regarding them as scientific theories and ... I see God as a competing explanation for facts about the universe and life. This is certainly how God has been seen by most theologians of past centuries and by most ordinary religious people today. ... Either admit that God is a scientific hypothesis and let him submit to the same judgement as any other scientific hypothesis. Or admit that his status is no higher than that of fairies and river sprites.³

So, either religious people have to treat belief in God as a scientific hypothesis or they have to admit that this belief has merely a fairy-tale status, it is a superstition. These are apparently the only options that Dawkins thinks possible.

Richard Swinburne seems to agree to a certain extent. He writes that: “My use of confirmation theory ... enables me to bring out the close similarities which exist between

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006, p. 31.

² Dawkins, quoted in Mark Johnston, *Saving God*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 46.

³ Richard Dawkins, “A Reply to Poole”, *Science and Christian Belief*, Vol. 7, 1995, pp. 46-47.

religious theories and large-scale scientific theories.”⁴ So Swinburne thinks that it is appropriate to take religious beliefs as expressing theories or hypotheses, and although they are not scientific theories they are closely similar to them.

Alvin Plantinga holds quite the opposite view. He opposes the idea that, for it to be rational to embrace Christian belief, the said belief would have to be, or be like, a scientific hypothesis. If that were the case, then:

Christians must presumably be thinking along the following lines: “What is the best explanation for all that organized complexity in the natural world and the characteristic features of human life and all the rest of what we see about us? Well, let’s see, perhaps there is an omniscient, omnipotent, wholly good being who created the world. Yes, that’s it; and perhaps this being is one of three persons, the other two being his divine son and a third person proceeding from the first two (or maybe just the first), yet there are not three gods but one; the second person became incarnate, suffered, was crucified, and died, thus atoning for our sins and making it possible for us to have life and have it more abundantly. Right: that’s got to be it; that’s a dandy explanation of the facts.” The critics then conclude, naturally enough, that Christian belief leaves a good bit to be desired.⁵

Plantinga maintains that Christians do not think like this, and nor should they think like this. The mistake their critics make is to assume that for a belief to be rationally acceptable it must enjoy the justification of being a good explanation of observed phenomena.

WHAT IS A HYPOTHESIS?

What should we think about these divergent views? Let us start by clarifying what a theory or hypothesis is. I will take a hypothesis (or a theory) to be a set of related beliefs, claims or assumptions which say something about reality (or some part of reality) that goes beyond what is directly experienced or observable, or goes beyond what is present, and which are expressed in order to explain or understand something. Hypotheses could be true or false, plausible or implausible, established or speculative, new or old, general or specific, explicit or implicit, but they all go beyond the evidence or the extant facts. So hypotheses tell us more than we can see for ourselves. This makes them interesting and in need of justification. Consequently, when we speak about “evidence”, we typically

⁴ Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, pp. 2-3.

⁵ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 387.

mean something which points to a reality that is not directly experienced, observed or present. Hypotheses differ in their credibility. Some of them are merely “working” hypotheses, which are only tentatively accepted. They are believed to be true but in need of further investigation: they are, perhaps, only as yet minimally tested. Other hypotheses are regarded not only as being true but in addition are thought to need no further investigation. These are hypotheses held with a high degree of certitude. For instance, evolutionary theory is a hypothesis (or rather a set of hypotheses) enjoying this latter status, and in consequence it functions as a paradigm for much of the research done in contemporary biology.

But if a hypothesis (or a theory) is a set of related claims which say something about reality (or some part of reality) reaching beyond what is directly observable or present, then hypotheses need not be scientific only, but could equally well be legal, philosophical, political or “everyday” hypotheses. I would maintain that in everyday life we form, all the time, hypotheses of different sorts, even if we quite often do not think of them as hypotheses. You notice that John’s cheeks are turning a little red whenever he gets close to Jane. You start to think that maybe John is attracted to Jane. In just about all the relationships you are involved in, be it with your partner, children, relatives, friends, or colleagues at work, you frequently wonder why they are doing this and not that. In many of these situations you make certain assumptions or believe certain things in order to make sense of what is going on. You go beyond the evidence and believe, with varying degrees of certainty, that things stand in a particular way. Your beliefs – which are sometimes justified, other times not – go beyond what you can directly experience in these everyday-life situations.

One thing that is problematic for Dawkins’s view is, then, that a large number of our beliefs are not scientific hypotheses, but hypotheses of other kinds. For most people, including most scientists, their set of non-scientific beliefs is much larger than the set of scientific beliefs that they embrace. (Perhaps you find it strange that I talk about “scientific beliefs”, but to say that science does not entail belief would be to say that scientists take nothing as true. But they typically do; so they believe *qua* scientists. The concept of believing refers to holding that something is true. If you hold it as true that life developed on earth due to natural selection, then you *believe* that life developed on earth due to natural selection.) I dare to say that people, including scientists with normal social

networks, have more everyday beliefs than they have scientific beliefs. We must never forget, after all, that the world is much bigger than the world of science, and in this bigger world we also form hypotheses and take for granted that we know things. If this is so, belief in God could be a hypothesis – something people believe in order to explain something else: yet it might still be a mistake to think that belief in God is a *scientific* hypothesis. This would be similar to the way in which it would be a mistake to think that my belief in your existence – after I have received a letter from you, whom I have never met before – is a scientific hypothesis.

BELIEF IN GOD IS A NON-SCIENTIFIC HYPOTHESIS?

Philip Clayton and Steven Knapp understand Christian faith in this broader way, and thus treat it as a non-scientific hypothesis. They write that:

Beneath all the layers of historical and cultural detail that define its multiple branches, the Christian tradition rests upon a provocative hypothesis about the nature of the universe and its ultimate source. That hypothesis can be restated as the belief or wager that behind or beyond all things, at the beginning of everything we see and know, there exists an ultimate reality that in some sense intended us (or beings like us) to be here and – again in *some* sense – desires our flourishing. Moreover, that ultimate reality has actually conveyed its intentions to human beings, whether directly or indirectly, and has done so in part through its extraordinary involvement in a particular set of events in human history.⁶

Clayton and Knapp claim that the God hypothesis is not a scientific hypothesis because it is a hypothesis about ultimate reality – a hypothesis which states that it (this God) is personal or mindlike, that it is such that it was capable of having beings like us in mind, and desiring their existence and flourishing, and so acted to bring about the existence of at least one universe in which it would be possible for them to exist and flourish. The features of this hypothesis, they maintain, are issues which cannot be tested or answered on scientific grounds alone: “After all, for any set of natural laws, one can always ask, ‘Why these laws, rather than other laws?’ Come to think of it, why should the universe be such that it is describable by laws at all? And finally, why should the universe be such that it is describable by the kinds of laws that human beings can identify

⁶ Philip Clayton and Steven Knapp, *The Predicament of Belief: Science, Philosophy, Faith*, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 2.

and understand?”⁷ The God question is of this latter sort, and therefore it is not a scientific but a *metaphysical* issue. Consequently, Clayton and Knapp take belief in God to be a metaphysical and not a scientific belief: it is about what ultimately exists and not about what can be discovered by science alone. Metaphysical hypotheses offer answers to questions along the following lines: “What is ultimately the case? Is there a source of all that is, and is there a direction in which everything is tending? Are the source and goal the same: is there a single reality that encompasses them both? And if so, does that reality have anything to do with us, with the way we live and the things we say and do here, in the brief time we spend on a minuscule fragment of the totality of everything there is?”⁸ Hence, they maintain that we should say that the God hypothesis is a metaphysical hypothesis, because it is about what ultimately exists; it is about whether mind, meaning, and value are more fundamental than matter and space-time in an account of what there is.

WHY BELIEF IN GOD IS NOT A HYPOTHESIS AT ALL

Still, a number of philosophers of religion reject, for slightly different reasons, the idea that religious belief, or more narrowly belief in God, is a hypothesis of any sort. Ryan C. Falcioni, for instance, maintains that religious beliefs are not hypotheses about the world because they do not function in that way in the lives of believers. The God hypothesis simply fails to do justice to the nature of religious belief. This can be remedied only through paying close attention to the role that religious beliefs play in the lives of believers. If we do that, we understand that religious beliefs “are not normally the type of things we come to accept through any form of broadly rational investigation. Religious beliefs may be the least volitional of our beliefs. For most of us, we are born into a family and find ourselves a part of a religious tradition that few of us stray from.”⁹

Keith Ward thinks it is to misunderstand the nature of belief in God to see it as a hypothesis or theory: “It is not a theory invented to explain particular occurrences in the world. What, then, is the idea of God for? God is primarily the supreme object of worship

⁷ Clayton and Knapp, *The Predicament of Belief*, p. 25.

⁸ Clayton and Knapp, *The Predicament of Belief*, p. 1.

⁹ Ryan C. Falcioni, “Is God a Hypothesis? The New Atheism, Contemporary Philosophy of Religion, and Philosophical Confusion”, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam, *Religion and the New Atheism*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010, p. 219.

and prayer. God is known by the believer as a presence and power in and through all finite things, is apprehended in prayer as a being of unlimited wisdom, bliss and compassion, and is worshipped as the supremely perfect being of whom all finite perfections are images and reflections.”¹⁰ Believing in God is a commitment to a self-transforming way of living in the world, of seeking to know, love and respond to a reality of supreme perfection.

Plantinga, as we have already seen, also shares this view. He thinks that there are all sorts of beliefs that we don't accept on the basis of evidence, don't treat as hypotheses, and don't accept tentatively; and in all sorts of cases we don't constantly look for better alternatives, and we are still rational in proceeding in this way: “We don't accept elementary mathematical and logical beliefs in that way, or beliefs of the sort *it seems to me I see something red*, or *I am not the only thing that exists*, or *my cognitive faculties are reliable*, or such beliefs as *there has been a past*, *there are other persons*, and *there is an external world*; and all this is, epistemically speaking, perfectly proper.”¹¹ Not all our beliefs are scientific hypotheses or any other form of hypotheses, and this is particularly so when it comes to religious beliefs. Not all beliefs are held in the way scientific beliefs are held, nor should they be; and not all beliefs are even held as hypotheses, and nor should they be.

We have found two grounds for questioning the idea that belief in God is a hypothesis. The first is that there is something special about religious beliefs that prevents them being the proper object of hypothesis formation. The second is that it is a mistake to think that all our beliefs are hypotheses – and thus like scientific beliefs – and that there are good reasons to think that religious beliefs or belief in God belong to this other class of beliefs.

ARE THERE ANY HUMAN BELIEFS THAT ARE NOT HYPOTHESES?

Let us start our critical inquiry by asking whether there are any human beliefs that are not hypotheses. I gave an example above of an everyday hypothesis: we can, under certain circumstances, think that maybe John is attracted to Jane. The reason for this might

¹⁰ Keith Ward, *God, Change and Necessity*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1996, pp. 96-97.

¹¹ Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 124

be that I notice that John's cheeks are turning a little red whenever he gets close to Jane. But I also (separably) believe that John's cheeks are turning a little red and that Jane is in the room. These latter of my beliefs are not, however, hypotheses. This is also true when it comes to my beliefs that I had breakfast this morning, that I am married, that I can read and write, that I am now thinking about what a hypothesis is, that I have a slight pain in my knee, that $2+2 = 4$, that there exist other persons, and that I am in love with Anna. None of these beliefs of mine are hypotheses.

Compare these everyday beliefs with those I would readily classify as scientific beliefs, such as the belief that genes are segments of chromosomes and that chromosomes are composed of DNA, or that nuclear fusion causes the sun's energy, or that particles of light travel with a velocity of 300 thousand kilometers per second. These beliefs, in contrast to everyday beliefs, are obtained by means of scientific inquiry and experimentation. Scientific belief formation presupposes the development of certain methods and experiments; and we are not all scientists, since most of us do not master such methods and techniques. Thus, science aims to give us justified beliefs, and perhaps even knowledge, about what the physical world is like in the realms that are too small, too distant or too far in the past to be directly experienced. This is done by developing theories about, for instance, the transmission of diseases, the motions of planets and stars, the succession of fossils and the similarities among organisms.

So, roughly speaking, we can distinguish between two types of beliefs: inferential and non-inferential beliefs. Inferential (or non-basic) beliefs are those beliefs we hold on the basis of other beliefs that we hold, when this latter set of beliefs constitute evidence or clues for the former set of beliefs. My belief that John's cheeks are turning a little red and my belief that Jane is in the room provide grounds for my inferential belief that John is attracted to Jane. It is because I believe that John's cheeks are turning a little red and that Jane is in the room (and perhaps a few other things) that I come to believe that John is attracted to Jane. Thus, hypotheses are instances of inferential belief. But it would be strange to say that John's cheeks are turning a little red is a hypothesis that I hold; I simply see that this is the case. The ground for my belief is not indirect or via any other belief. However, notice that what is a hypothesis or inferential belief for me is not necessarily a hypothesis or inferential belief for someone else. If John is attracted to Jane, then this belief is a direct belief for John himself. It could also be a non-inferential belief for you

if John were to tell you – but not me – that this is the case. The belief that $2+2 = 4$ is a non-inferential belief of mine, whereas $23 \times 17 = 391$ is not; but it might be for some people who are capable of immediately forming that belief.

Correspondingly, we have two different instances of knowledge: inferential knowledge and non-inferential knowledge. Inferential knowledge is knowledge that we have which is based on – inferred from – other things we know that constitute evidence for it. For instance, there are footprints outside my window, and I therefore know, inferentially, that a person has passed by outside my window. Non-inferential knowledge is, in contrast, knowledge which is not reliant on other things which we already know and need to take as evidence. If, instead, I had actually seen a person passing by outside my window, my knowledge of this would be an example of non-inferential knowledge. Phrased differently, in the first case the assumption that a person has passed by my window provides the best explanation of the evidence, that is, the presence of those footprints. In the second case, however, I simply see a person passing by. I neither need to see something else (the footprints) from which I infer this person, nor need I offer a best explanation of what is seen. Non-inferential knowledge is typically to be preferred, even if all we can get our hands on is quite often of the inferential sort. When I get home in the evening, seeing my wife is always preferable to merely inferring her presence in the house from various items of evidence.

This also explains why we find it inappropriate or puzzling to talk about theories or hypotheses when dealing with perceptual beliefs or observations we have made. But it is, of course, neither inappropriate nor puzzling to talk about theories or hypotheses in science. This is so, simply because scientific knowledge is characteristically a species of inferential knowledge. Thus, perceptual knowledge is not scientific knowledge. Observational beliefs and knowledge are, rather, things that science typically takes for granted. Science starts from these things.

So it is a mistake to think that all our beliefs are hypotheses and in this way like scientific beliefs. Some of our beliefs are inferential beliefs whereas others are non-inferential. Are there, then, any reasons to think that religious beliefs, or belief in God in particular, belong to this other class of beliefs?

THE AIMS OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION

It seems more or less obvious that the aims of science and religion are different. Whereas the goal of science is to explain and predict observable events, the goal of a religion such as Christianity is rather to transform people's lives as a response to an encounter with a divine reality:¹² a reality which, religious believers claim, helps them to deal with lived experiences (such as suffering and anxiety), and which gives their lives meaning, purpose or value. Stephen Wykstra writes:

If we approach the claims of a theistic complex like Christianity – claims having to do with Creation, Covenant, Sin, Judgment, Grace, Incarnation, and the like – as if they must embody the values of scientific theorizing, we will not assess them by appropriate criteria; indeed, we will probably not even understand them. Their point is not to help us predict, control, and contrive the world.¹³

Belief in God is, therefore, probably more closely related to belief in other persons than to belief in the existence of genes, electrons, planets or other scientific stuff. This explains why it could even be deeply problematic to treat belief in God as a hypothesis. To understand, for instance, one's relationship with one's beloved, in matters of love, as a hypothesis and thus as something one should test by searching for counter-evidence, would seem to threaten the very foundation necessary for a loving relationship – it would undermine the trust and loyalty that must exist between two lovers. But this seems also true about belief in God: because it is not just a matter of mentally assenting to a set of propositions, but of trusting God. To treat belief in God as a hypothesis might be like saying that a good marriage is best achieved by always seeking evidence both of fidelity and of infidelity.

What follows? For one thing, it follows that it is not surprising if many religious believers do not consider their religious faith to be a hypothesis. Consequently, to discuss the rationality of religious commitment as if people's belief in God *is* for them a hypothesis, is to seriously misunderstand the nature of many people's religious faith. Moreover, to treat the issue as if such people's belief in God *ought to be* a hypothesis is unjustified. The reason for this is perhaps best explained by going back to the everyday

¹² Mikael Stenmark, "How to Relate Christian Faith and Science", Jim Stump and Alan Padgett (eds.), *Blackwell Companion to Science and Christianity*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, pp. 63-73.

¹³ Stephen Wykstra, "Reasons, Redemption, and Realism", ed. M. D. Beaty, *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990, p. 138.

life situation described earlier. Imagine again that this morning I was in my kitchen and saw a man pass by outside the window. Assume now that a skeptic would claim that it is rational for me to believe this only if I treat my belief as a hypothesis. In other words, I must first go out and check whether there are any traces left after the man and, secondly, for it to be rational of me to accept my conviction, I have to believe it on the basis of evidence found. Suppose further, that neither the skeptic nor I are able to find any traces, any mark of footprints. The skeptic's conclusion is clear. He claims that it is irrational for me to hold this belief. Stammering, I maintain, however, my claim: "But, but ... I saw him!"

I would suggest that many religious believers are in an analogous situation with respect to their belief in God.¹⁴ They have experienced God's presence in their lives; they have encountered, at least in glimpses, a divine reality. In a similar way to how I believe that a man passed by my window, they believe that God exists and believe in God's presence in their lives. If this is correct, it is unreasonable to demand that such people should view their belief in God as a hypothesis of some kind. Their belief, just like mine, is *directly* experientially grounded. This is in contrast to the belief the skeptic would have adopted if there had been footprints outside my window. The skeptic's belief would then have been *indirectly* experientially grounded, in that he or she would have derived the existence of this man from certain facts or evidence (such as the presents of footprints, their depth and so forth). The same is true in all other cases when hypotheses are assumed or proposed.

Notice, however, that the things we believe and which are directly experientially grounded can nevertheless sometimes be things we are or should be *uncertain* about. I was quite certain because I clearly saw a man outside the kitchen window. But the situation could just as well have been that I merely saw the contours of a man in the window, but because my focus was elsewhere or because the sun shone through the window I am uncertain about what I really saw. The same thing can be true about religious belief. Some religious believers have experienced mere minor glimpses in their lives of what they think is God, and so they do believe in God, but still feel uncertain. Others have had more profound experiences of God's presence, experiences which are harder for them

¹⁴ See William P. Alston, *Perceiving God*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, for an attempt to justify this analogy.

to doubt. Either way, they could be mistaken or irrational in believing what they believe. The cognitive mechanism or process which generates this belief might for instance be unreliable or malfunctioning. The point is this: their belief in God neither is, nor need be, regarded by them as being a hypothesis. Religious believers do not have to treat their belief in God as a hypothesis because for many of them this belief is directly experientially grounded, whatever their degree of certitude.

But would this mean that no religious believer whatsoever, nor any other person, would be justified in seeing belief in God as a hypothesis? I do not think this follows. Consider an example from another context. My belief that my wife loves me is for me not a hypothesis. However, this does not mean that it could not be a hypothesis for somebody else. Suppose, for example, two persons hear me say that my wife loves me. One of them believes me; the other does not. So they decide to treat my belief as a hypothesis and try to collect evidence for or against its truth, which they both could accept. I can see nothing problematic about that.

The same seems to be true about religion. Take a person who has never experienced God's presence at first hand. Thought she might attach some importance to the testimony of believers, what makes her believe in God is crucially that she thinks that she can see God's footprints in the universe. The existence and beauty of the cosmos convince her that God exists and is worthy of worship. This person's belief in God is, thus, indirectly experientially grounded. It is for her an inferential belief. Perhaps from a religious perspective there is a better way of obtaining a belief in God, but there is no reason to doubt that this is a genuine faith. This person can hardly be said to have misunderstood belief in God in some fundamental way. Or take religious skeptics who wonder about the rationality of religious faith. They know about believers' testimony but that is not sufficient for them. Instead they wonder whether it would not be reasonable to assume that if the God whom believers are talking about really exists, really has created heaven and earth, then somehow this divine reality should have left some marks, some footprints in the world.

TWO DIFFERENT QUESTIONS

Hence we should not confuse the two questions: “Must or should people see their belief in God as a hypothesis?” and “Can people see belief in God as a hypothesis?” The answer to the first, as we have seen, is that religious believers need not treat their belief in God as a hypothesis, because for many of them this conviction is directly experientially grounded. The answer to the second is that religious people can understand their belief in God as a hypothesis if it is indirectly experientially grounded, and the same is true of religious skeptics.

Where does this leave us? One thing we realize is that there is a crucial difference between religion and science on this point. Scientists, whether or not they believe a particular hypothesis to be true, always treat it as an assumption made to explain a phenomenon and which needs to be supported by other things serving as evidence; whereas religious believers and religious skeptics do not share such an agreement when debating whether or not belief in God is true or rational. In other words, scientists who disagree face a situation analogous to one in which two persons are looking at some marks in the ground that look somewhat like footprints, and person *A* believes that a human being has been standing there, whereas person *B* thinks otherwise. They interpret the evidence in different ways. The believer and the religious skeptic, on the other hand, typically face a situation analogous to one in which person *A* claims that she has seen a man passing by outside the window and a person *B* doubts this to be the case (perhaps on the grounds that person *A* was drunk at the time or that no footprints can be found outside the window).

Second, and of great importance for our inquiry, even if we cannot find any evidence of the presence of God in the physical world, this would not automatically undermine the credibility of religious faith, whereas the credibility of a proposed scientific hypothesis would typically be undermined if no evidence could be found supporting it. The reason for this is that belief in God need not be held on the basis of other beliefs that function as evidence; instead it can be, and often is, directly experientially grounded. Just like my belief that I have seen a man pass by outside my window is not automatically undermined by the lack of footprints, people’s belief in God is not necessarily challenged if God has not left any footprints detectable by the sciences or by any other form of human inquiry. But that is, of course, not to deny that if such divine footprints could be found, it would strengthen the case that God really exists, just

as the credibility of my belief in this man having passed by outside my window would be strengthened if footprints had been found. The discrepancy is that belief in God is typically a non-inferential belief, whereas belief in electrons, natural selection, and mutations are inferential beliefs.

Third, it is not necessarily improper for religious believers to *sometimes* treat their religious faith as a hypothesis or set of hypotheses, in for instance a discussion with religious skeptics. I would typically not treat my belief that my wife loves me as a hypothesis, but I could do that in a particular situation. I suggest that religious believers can in a similar way use their belief in God as a hypothesis accounting for a certain range of phenomena, for instance, consciousness, values, the order and beauty of the world. The same holds true for participants in the science–religion dialogue.

But it is still, I think, a mistake to maintain, as Clayton and Knapp do, that the Christian tradition rests upon a provocative hypothesis. It does not rest upon a provocative hypothesis at all, because it is not developed and it does not continue to exist in order to explain particular occurrences in this world or the world beyond. It rather arises from experiences of God’s presence in people’s lives through Jesus Christ, and because it offers a path from sin, suffering and evil to salvation, healing and human flourishing. This is something Christians today think is of profound importance, and therefore this tradition is still alive and well. God is taken by Christians (and of course by many other faith communities as well) to be the supreme object of worship and prayer, and not a metaphysical hypothesis. Believing in God is a commitment to a self-transforming way of living in the world, of seeking to know, love and respond to a supreme reality. Certain individuals, like Clayton and Knapp, might still of course be Christians because their faith is for them a provocative hypothesis which has in their life and thinking become confirmed to a certain degree. Or maybe (I am just speculating here) they have misunderstood the nature of their own faith because they have uncritically or unconsciously taken science as their model for knowledge and rational belief?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It might sound like I am very critical of what Clayton and Knapp are trying to do; but I am not. This is because I recognize that religious skeptics must, it seems, treat

Christian faith as a hypothesis, when they have not directly experienced the presence of God in their lives. So believers can say: “Yes, one can think about faith as a kind of hypothesis *even if it is not that for us.*” We can speculate on how things would be if God exists, having created the world and revealed God’s self in Christ, and has offered a way to salvation, healing and flourishing for human beings. Or, if we want to compare things, how would a universe made by the Christian God be different from one that is a product only of natural processes? If their particular worldview pertained, how would theists’ and atheists’ expectations in this regard be different? But the rationality (or irrationality) of Christian belief in God neither arises from nor depends merely on the outcome of such a speculative inquiry, since Christian belief is not a hypothesis.

So perhaps Clayton and Knapp’s approach is fine as long as we add a proper qualifier: *although the Christian community does not see it in this way*, religious skeptics may see Christian faith such that beneath all the layers of historical and cultural detail that define its multiple branches, the Christian tradition rests upon a provocative hypothesis about the nature of the universe and its ultimate source. That hypothesis can be restated as the belief or wager that behind or beyond all things, at the beginning of everything we see and know, there exists an ultimate reality that in some sense intended us (or beings like us) to be here and – again in some sense – desires our flourishing. And perhaps Dawkins is right after all that a universe with God would look different from a universe without – even if belief in God, for the believer herself, is not a scientific hypothesis nor should be treated as such by the religious skeptic? This is so, since belief in God *may entail* that any created universe will have a specific character – it will be intelligible, morally ordered and goal directed. Theism is then open to being undermined; but can indeed be confirmed, if the universe is ordered and susceptible to rational inquiry, that it is a world with consciousness, even self-consciousness, that it is a world with significant free agency, that it is a world with objective moral obligations and that it seems conducive to the realization of beauty, virtue and creativity. Science can provide insights and theories that are of importance for trying to answer this type of question, but, *pace* Dawkins, it cannot alone answer them – for this we need philosophy. Philosophy should in fact be seen as the essential bridge between science and religion.