Six

Natural Religion

Scientific research on children's developing minds and supernatural beliefs suggests that children normally and rapidly acquire minds that facilitate belief in supernatural agents. Particularly in the first year after birth, children distinguish between agents and nonagents, understanding agents as able to move themselves in purposeful ways to pursue goals. They are keen to find agency around them, even given scant evidence. Not long after their first birthday, babies appear to understand that agents, but not natural forces or ordinary objects, can create order out of disorder. Before children start school, they see the natural world as purposefully designed—even in ways that religious parents would not teach or endorse. This tendency to see function and purpose, plus an unde-
standing that purpose and order come from minded beings, makes children likely to see natural phenomena as intentionally created. Who is the creator? Children know people are not good candidates. It must have been a god.

Gods are not just humans with the ability to make mountains, trees, and butterflies, however. Early default assumptions about minded agents make it easy for children to understand gods as having full-access knowledge, superperception, superpower, immortality, and perhaps moral goodness. In fact, on some of these dimensions, children show the capability of reasoning in a theologically accurate way before being able to reason accurately about human beings on the same dimensions.

This collection of religious ideas is among the features of what I call natural religion. In this chapter, I describe natural religion and how it deviates from theological beliefs. Though children have strong natural tendencies toward religion generally, these tendencies do not inevitably propel them toward any one religion. They still have a lot to learn.

**Natural Religion**

Children are born believers of what I call natural religion—parallel to the natural language that many linguists say children’s minds are naturally inclined toward understanding. English, Hindi, Mandarin, Spanish, Swahili, Yukatec, and the other languages of the world are derivations and elaborations of this natural language. Similarly, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Mormonism, Sikhism, and other

tribal and world religions are derivations and elaborations of natural religion. Natural language more firmly constrains the world’s languages than natural religion does the world’s religions, but natural religion still provides anchor points for the world’s religions from which they will have difficulty straying. The study of natural religion remains in its infancy (especially as compared to the study of natural language), but we may tentatively project some of the features of natural religion.

Research into children’s acquisition of religious ideas and cross-cultural comparisons suggest that natural religion includes several assumptions:

- Superhuman beings with thoughts, wants, perspectives, and emotions exist.
- Elements of the natural world such as rocks, trees, mountains, and animals are purposefully and intentionally designed by some kind of superhuman being(s), who must therefore have superhuman power.
- Superhuman beings generally know things that humans do not (they can be superknowing or superperceiving, or both), perhaps particularly things that are important for human relations.
- Superhuman beings may be invisible and immortal, but they are not outside space and time.
- Superhuman beings have character, good or bad.
- Like humans, superhuman beings have free will and can and do interact with people, sometimes rewarding and sometimes punishing them.
- Moral norms are unchangeable, even by superhumans.
- People may continue to exist without their earthly bodies after death.

This natural religion then gets specified, amplified, or even contradicted in particular cultural settings—what we often call theology—not unlike how we learn the particulars of our native language. For instance, in a Christian cultural context, the features of natural religion might be theologically elaborated in the following way (elaborations in italics):

- Superhuman beings with thoughts, wants, perspectives, and emotions exist; they consist of a supreme God and lesser beings such as angels and devils.
- Elements of the natural world such as rocks, trees, mountains, and animals are purposefully and intentionally designed by some kind of superhuman being(s), who must therefore have superhuman power. The natural world was created by a single God.
- Superhuman beings generally know things that humans do not (they can be superknowing or superperceiving, or both), perhaps particularly things that are important for human relations. God knows absolutely everything that can be known and nothing can escape God's attention, whereas other superhuman beings, such as angels or Satan, are superhuman in knowledge but still limited.
- Superhuman beings may be invisible and immortal, but they are not outside space and time. God and the other superhuman beings are typically invisible but may become visible. God is immortal and is eternal. Other superhuman beings are not mortal in the biological sense but are immortal only if God allows them to be, and they do exist in time.
- Superhuman beings have character, good or bad. God is perfectly and unchangingly good; the other superhuman beings may be good or bad.
- Like humans, superhuman beings have free will and can and do interact with people, sometimes rewarding and sometimes punishing or extracting revenge. God sometimes directly punishes wrongdoing.
- Moral norms are unchangeable, even by superhumans. Moral norms are an expression of God's infinite character and as such are unchangeable.
- People may continue to exist without their earthly bodies after death. God may choose to resurrect people after death to continue existing in heaven.

Note that these illustrative elaborations are harder to understand and more cumbersome to express than the jumping-off point supplied by natural religion—and I tried to keep them simple. The more complex that theological ideas are—that is, the more they deviate from the ordinary cognition that undergirds natural religion—the more effort that will be required to teach them and maintain them, a point I return to and illustrate.

Given the relative difficulty of grasping particular theological claims as opposed to general natural religion, it is no surprise that children, who do not have the same intellectual resources as adolescents or adults, often get theologies wrong. Though the naturally developing wiring of human brains typically pro-
duces minds ready and willing to believe in gods as intelligent, intentional beings that designed the natural world, perhaps also having infallible beliefs, possessing superperception and superpower, and being immortal, children do not have the sophisticated, fleshed-out theologies some adults acquire. Let’s face it: some ideas about gods are just plain hard to understand, let alone believe. Piaget got a lot right in regarding many ideas as beyond the grasp of young children. Some theological ideas escape even adults’ comprehension.

Take the doctrine of the Trinity, for instance. Traditional Christianity maintains that there is only one God and God consists of three “persons”: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The careful formulation of this doctrine and what it means and does not mean has been the subject of numerous church councils and theological treatises spanning more than a millennium. I suspect that for most of the world’s 2 billion Christians, this doctrine remains a hard-to-understand mystery but not the sort of thing to spend too much time fretting about. Many critics of Christianity conclude (a bit prematurely, I think) that the doctrine is absolutely incomprehensible and therefore nonsense.¹ My point is not that the cognitively unnatural or conceptually cumbersome concepts of theology are wrong or right, only that they take more time and effort to acquire, and they certainly fall outside children’s natural predilections. Culturally special conditions need to be in place for these kinds of ideas to successfully spread.

Cognitive biases and tendencies, born out of maturationally natural systems and not cultural particularities, make children born believers. Nevertheless, it would be misleading not to point out that a gap still exists between what kinds of supernatural beliefs come naturally to children and what kind of theological beliefs are endorsed and promoted by adult theologians. Children may be born believers, but it would be a stretch to call them born theologians. Both the kinds of ideas that theologians develop and the intellectual practice of doing theology may be relatively unnatural.

LESS NATURAL RELIGION

In the following sections, I offer theological ideas that I regard as fairly unnatural and not what children are prone to adopt. I then take a brief detour into the difference between religion and theology to make the point that though children are born believers in religion, they are not born theologians.

Strict Monothecism

Remember Zeus, Apollo, Hermes, and Venus from grade school? Or perhaps Anubis, Ra, Osiris, and Isis? The ancient Aztecs, Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, Incas, and Romans all had a large range of gods with divisions of labor: sun gods, fertility gods, gods of the dead, and so forth. Similarly, Hinduism features perhaps hundreds of gods and goddesses, and the Maya of today have a large pantheon of gods. Given the historical and cross-cultural evidence, it would be hard to argue that belief in only one god is more “natural” than multiple gods.²

Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are known as the great monotheisms, all insisting that there is only one God, but even in these traditions, people believe in numerous supernatural
beings, including angels, devils, saints, and ghosts. In a certain respect, believing in numerous superhuman agents appears to be the most natural type of belief system. We have no evidence that suggests children are born monotheists in a strict sense. Packaging all ambiguous experiences from the hypersensitive agency detection device—including episodes of great fortune and misfortune and the apparent detection of the recently deceased—together with accounting for design and purpose in the natural world as attributable to one being might require too much abstraction and intellectual nimbleness to be terribly common.

Nontemporality

Many Muslim, Jewish, and Christian theologians teach that God is outside time, or nontemporal. This may be one way to make sense of scriptural passages such as 2 Peter 3:8, which reads: “But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” God being outside time also features in some explanations for how it is that God can know our future without taking away our free will. But what does it mean for God to be outside time? I have trouble imagining what that might be like or how to talk about a being outside time. Taken seriously it means that there is something peculiar about saying that “when I pray, God hears me” or that “in the past God spoke to Abraham.” I would be very surprised indeed if young children have no problem with God’s nontemporality.

Natural Religion

Nonspatiality

The idea of a being that does not have any location in space—about whom we cannot really say it is here, there, anywhere, or everywhere—strikes me as extremely unlikely to be readily embraced by children. As with nontemporality, this nonspatiality figures in many theologies. If God is not a material being, it is misleading to say God is in heaven or God is everywhere. These expressions amount to metaphors because a being with no location is too hard to handle—for children or adults.

Unlimited Attention

It is one thing to be able to see in a darkened box or through barriers or to hear something from across the universe. These properties of a divinity appear to be among those children are ready to make sense of and accept. It is another thing to pay attention to what is in every darkened box everywhere and every sound emitted from every corner of the universe. Here I am pointing to the difference between being able to see and actually watching, or being able to hear and actively listening. A more common expression of this unlimited attention problem is the idea that God watches you and everyone else all the time or that God listens to everyone’s prayers from all over the world at the same time.

We have no reason to believe that children or adults find the property of unlimited attention the least bit natural or intuitive. Our own limits on attention and inability to imagine what it would be like to simultaneously hear everyone’s thoughts or watch everyone’s activities makes the idea of any being hav-
BORN BELIEVERS

ing such a property hard to readily comprehend. I suspect that when confronted with the idea of a being that can pay attention to everything, we are prone to recast the property as simply knowing everything. Can God pay attention to everything at once? What would that mean? It would mean God knows everything. God knowing everything, or having access to any scene you would like to mention, is not so hard to understand.

Grace—Maybe Easy for Kids But Not for Adults?

A theological concept that I have struggled with regarding its relative naturalness for children to grasp is grace. Grace is sometimes defined as unmerited favor or not getting the punishment we deserve. In Christian theology, grace captures the idea that salvation is not earned or deserved but is a free gift from God to those who receive it. Think of a Christmas present from Grandma when you were a child. You didn’t earn it, and there is no expectation of reciprocating—no quid pro quo. To get it, all you have to do is say “thank you” and unwrap it. Many Christians say God’s grace is like this present: receiving it and expressing gratitude is the only reasonable response.

I use the image of a Christmas present from Grandma because it illustrates the potential difference between children’s and adults’ reactions to the notion of grace. In public question and answer sessions after lectures and addresses, I have suggested that the Christian doctrine of grace is not terribly natural. Adults, at least, through the ages seem compelled to add stipulations to the gift of salvation: that you have to behave yourself, go to church, wear trousers if male and dresses if female (instead of traditional ethnic attire), read the Bible frequently, pray daily, and so forth. That so many preachers include sermons on grace in their regular offerings of topics, month after month, year after year, attests that the message just is not sticking. People seem to have a deeply ingrained sense of fair exchange practices. If you give me something, I am obligated to give you something of comparable value. If I do not reciprocate, I am in your debt. Being in someone else’s debt is uncomfortable, so we try to settle the account. Worse still is when someone else receives grace instead of justice. Theologian Donald McCullough puts the situation thus:

Grace set to music is one thing, but what about grace itself? What about grace as an idea? Grace as an act? Grace as a force? We don’t like it. To be sure, we appreciate brief encounters with it, such as when we forget to pay the health insurance premium and we’re told not to worry because there is a “grace period.” We’re thankful for these minor reprieves, for Grace Lite. But if the real thing happens, if we’re seized by a full-bodied, take-no-prisoners grace, we have far more ambivalent feelings. When a muscled arm of mercy lifts us by the scruff of the neck and sets us in a new place, a better place we neither earned nor deserved, we’re likely to protest that, given time, we could have gotten ourselves there, thank you very much, and without the rough treatment. Even worse, if grace happens to someone else, someone we know doesn’t deserve it, someone we can’t stand, then we don’t want to hear about grace, let alone see it in operation. In such circumstances, grace seems more like a miscarriage of justice.
Evolutionary psychologists Leda Cosmides and John Tooby have talked about how sensitive people are to social exchange rules and have argued that this sensitivity is an evolved cognitive capacity. Even the feeling of gratitude may be tough for us. If someone pays us an enormously generous kindness, we may feel embarrassed, guilty, or indebted instead of grateful. So no matter how many times preachers tell us, “God doesn’t need anything from you,” or “The price Jesus paid is too big for any mortal to reciprocate,” or the like, we just cannot seem to shake that nagging feeling that God wants something from us in exchange for salvation. These sorts of considerations have led me to think sometimes that grace is counterintuitive to the way people think.

But maybe children do not have the same problems with grace and gratitude that many adults have. Unlike adults who might have a deep sense of obligation and giving like-for-like, children might have no such feelings. Children, especially very young ones, do not have the resources or ability to reciprocate in a tit-for-tat fashion with others, and they are not often embarrassed by others giving them gifts or doing things for them. Pride does not get in the way. If Grandma gives a child a gift of a trip to Disneyland, he is not going to feel uncomfortable or wonder about how he will repay the gift. In his excitement, he might need reminding to say “thank you,” but it isn’t because he is not thankful or gushing with gratitude. (When Aunt Mabel gave him the five-pack of argyle socks, that was when he was ungrateful and needed reminding to be courteous anyway.) If children did have the same hang-ups with allowing others to be gracious toward them—giving what was not earned or strictly deserved—they would be riddled with angst and as soon as they were teenagers and began collecting their first paychecks, they would immediately give it to their parents with penitent promises to pay back their immeasurable debts as soon as possible.

These observations, speculative as they are, make me wonder whether children might be better able to accept grace from God too—not feeling the need to earn salvation or add stipulations and conditions. Could this easy acceptance of grace be what Jesus meant by saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these”?

Animism

The examples above are all theological ideas that deviate from natural religion. We may associate animism with traditional religions and assume that it is part of natural religion. Actually animism too is an intellectual or theological elaboration of natural religion. Some traditional and new age belief systems hold that rocks, mountains, and streams have spirits or life forces or that nonanimals have consciousness. These animistic ideas are sometimes thought to be among the earliest of religious beliefs, in part because of the common but misguided notion that children are confused as to what counts as a living thing and what does not, and that children readily treat nonconscious beings as conscious, intentional agents. The reasoning seems to be that if children have to learn what is animate and what is not, then so too did earlier peoples. Apart from the danger in assuming past peoples were like contemporary children, the evidence that children are naturally animists is shaky at best.
In Chapter 3 I shared that when my daughter was two years old, she used to pick up large earthworms in the yard and then carry them around, talking to them and cooing at them as if they were babies. She used to do the same with a feather duster. We even found her putting cans of vegetables in her toy stroller and Acting as if the cans were babies. These behaviors are the sorts that we might take as evidence that young children do not know the difference between people and earthworms or between living and nonliving things. But is it really good evidence? This same child who treated the feather duster as a baby also tried the feather duster to dust her room and knew to return worms to the ground or they would “die,” but she never tried to use the earthworms or canned goods to clean her room or buried the canned goods or feather duster in fear they might die. Even two year olds are not stupid. While they may pretend that objects, like dolls or feather dusters are alive or conscious, they know that they are not.

Plenty of experimental evidence demonstrates that preschool-aged children importantly discriminate between living and nonliving things. For instance, within the first two or three years of age, children know that objects such as plants and balls must be touched in order to move, whereas animate beings such as people can interact at a distance. By age five, children seem to have a broad range of biological expectations for living things that do not apply to rocks, balls, or other nonliving things. For example, living things are thought to have an internal life force that makes them grow and move and natural inside parts, whereas machines have artificial parts. Living things cannot be changed from one category to another by external modifications (such as making a skunk look like a raccoon), whereas tools and other human-made things can. Animals have baby animals and move to eat and survive, but rocks and sticks do not, and living things have parts that do things for them, whereas human-made objects have parts that do things for the people that use them. In fact, there is reason to believe that young children underscribe being alive (such as to plants, fungi, and nonmoving primitive animals) more than other underscribe, not recognizing that lichens, mushrooms, molds, and trees are alive as early as they understand that dogs, birds, and snails are. The idea that children and, hence, early peoples assume that all objects are alive or conscious simply does not stand up to scientific evidence. There is no reason to believe, therefore, that children are intuitively drawn to animism of the sort we see in religious traditions.

Some aspects of animism, as seen in many belief systems of adults, however, might not be all that unnatural. One key component of natural folk biology—the idea that living things have an animating life force or vitality—may provide the non-reflective timber from which various reflective cultural beliefs are built, such as animating spirits, life forces, the Chinese qi, and other beliefs about unseen internal energies (spirits) that animate humans (and sometimes other things). Judaism and Christianity share the notion that the breath or spirit of God is an animating and energizing force transforming inert matter into living things, or making people and animals more or less lively and energetic. Perhaps all of these notions of spirit as an animating force might find their intuitive appeal in natural cognitive thought concerning biological thought. What is
slightly unnatural and counterintuitive about animism is the suggestion that even rocks and trees are as comparably spirited as people or animals.

**NOT BORN TO BELIEVE A PARTICULAR THEOLOGICAL TRADITION**

Throughout this book, I have tried to make the case that recently acquired scientific evidence suggests that children have a naturally developing receptivity to many core religious beliefs, particularly beliefs about the existence of supernatural beings. Given little environmental encouragement, they become believers in superhuman agency. But this natural receptivity to religious ideas is limited. Many theological ideas, or the sort that religious specialists develop and many believers affirm as part of historic creeds, do not number with those children are biased to acquire. Rather, these theological beliefs (such as noncontemporality, nonspatiality, and the like) are conceptually difficult for children (and adults) and require special cultural scaffolding to spread effectively. In this regard, theological ideas share much in common with other ideas generated reflectively in special cultural conditions such as those found in modern science.

One implication of this limitation for the born believers thesis is that children are not “born believers” in any specific religious or theological tradition. After public lectures arguing for the born believers thesis, I received numerous e-mails and found blogs from Muslims claiming that the born believers thesis is similar to a standard teaching in Islam. Here is an illustrative note:

Hallo, I read the article of Dr Barrett about believing in GOD. As a Muslim I believe in GOD and I know a lot about what Dr Barrett explained that every human is born believing in GOD naturally. Our Prophet Mohammed told us before more than 1400 years ago when said each fetus born believing in GOD naturally, and his father or mother makes him differ.

I appreciate this affirmation, but the evidence to date supports only the naturalness of belief in a mighty creator God, not that children are born to believe in orthodox Muslim, Jewish, or Christian theology—or any other for that matter. They may be biased in a general sense toward some religions over others—perhaps this is one reason that some religions spread more widely than others—but I know of no religious tradition that perfectly maps onto those ideas that children are inclined to believe.

Some who have a romantic view of children being uncorrupted and, hence, possessing access to life’s truths most directly, might try to build a theology based on children’s natural religious proclivities. Those who regard children as basically stupid might regard the natural receptivity of children to certain religious beliefs as grounds for rejecting them. I regard both impulses as misguided, a discussion I present in the next chapter.
RELIGION IS NOT THEOLOGY

The cognitive science of religion, in which I participate, typically distinguishes between religious and theological thought. There seems to be a difference between what people tend to believe in an automatic, day-to-day sort of way and what they believe when they stop to reflect and systematically figure out what they do and do not believe. Some ideas, such as the particular sense in which Krishna might be Vishnu but not exactly the same, or the Christian God might be three persons at one time, or how exactly karma works, or what precisely happens to a Mormon after death are the sorts of issues that theologians rigorously ponder and argue about in hopes of getting things right. Theologians have spent, and continue to spend, enormous amounts of attention and energy on trying to work out the reasonableness of different propositions regarding God (or gods) and related matters. They draw on philosophy, science, textual studies, linguistics, and historical considerations to reach their conclusions. Such intellectual activities do not often characterize the behavior of devoutly religious adults, let alone children. Most individual believers do not engage in such theological exercises but are content to live religiously. To be religious is not to be a theologian, or vice versa.

A similar distinction between folk ideas and formal, reflective beliefs appears in other domains. For instance, by four years old, children have a sense for the basic grammar of their native language. If they are English speakers, they know that “the dog likes to eat cucumbers” is grammatical (even if strange), but “the likes to cucumber eat dog” is nonsense.

This folk language capacity, however, is distinguishable from the sorts of reflective knowledge about language use that adult specialists acquire in studying language. A linguist might be able to tell us more precisely the relationship among various parts of speech in English and why it is that “the dog likes to eat cucumbers” is better formed than “the dog, cucumbers to eat, he likes” (as Star Wars' Yoda might say), and various other specialized knowledge—none of which is necessary to successfully use the English language to talk on the telephone, order food at a restaurant, or share gossip by the watercooler. Regarding language, then, we can distinguish between folk knowledge of language and linguistics.

Although developmental psychologists sometimes draw parallels between the way children learn about the natural world and the way scientists do, a large difference exists between folk understandings of the natural world and scientific ones. Science, linguistics, and theology, on the one hand, and folk knowledge, language, and religion, on the other, differ in terms of degree of conscious reflection, effort, and commonness. The first group contains examples of relatively rarified thought that not all people engage in or care about. Because these kinds of thought take time and effort—they do not come naturally to us—they have not developed in all cultural contexts, let alone in all individuals. These observations imply that you can have knowledge about the natural world, language, or religion without having much, if any, knowledge that might be called science, linguistics, or theology.
FROM NATURAL RELIGION TO THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

The picture of religious development arising from the research presented here (among many other studies) is that children are naturally drawn to some basic religious ideas and related practices (natural religion), and then the meat of a religious and theological tradition as taught by parents grows on this skeleton. It is this later cultural elaboration that provides the bewildering variety of theological beliefs that we see when surveying the world's belief systems.

Ideas about gods from around the world come in dizzying diversity. Some have animal forms, some have human forms, and some have no form at all. Some are all-knowing; some know about the same amount or kinds of things as people. Some are morally upstanding, and others are cruel. Some gods possess superpowers, and others have very little power. And sometimes a god is regarded as a kind of unknowable, indestructible otherness.

Among the Mali Baining of Papua New Guinea, the forest spirits, or sega, are strikingly human-like beings. Anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse observed that the sega are so human-like in appearance that they are hard to distinguish from people. “Sega are thought to look like humans, although few people have actually seen any, except in dreams. People cannot readily explain how they recognized what they had seen as a supernatural being, rather than as a mortal stranger.” The sega, however, are usually invisible to humans, their presence made known through fortune or misfortune:

Sega are not offended by moral transgressions injurious to humans, and only punish unwanted interference in their own affairs. The problem is that, unlike dangers in the forest that can be seen (e.g., pythons, nettles, sharp objects), sega cannot usually be identified and avoided, and the fact that they have been disturbed or provoked only becomes apparent later, when misfortune strikes.15

In contrast to the humanness of the Baining sega, the great monotheisms offer strikingly complex, abstract views of God, often stressing how different God is from people and how incomplete or inadequate our understanding of God can be. For instance, Islamic theologian Mohammad Zia Ullah wrote:

God is infinite, pervasive, and man finite and limited to a locality. Man cannot comprehend God as he can other things. . . . God is without limits, without dimensions. . . . How can a limitless, infinite being be contained in the mind of a limited being like man?16

Comparably, Christian theologian Gordon Spykman, in discussing the biblical view of God, explains that on this view, God and the world are two uniquely distinct realities. The difference between them is not merely quantitative but qualitative. God is not simply more of what we are. There is an essential discontinuity, not just a share of difference, nor a gradual more-or-less distinction, as though God has only a “running head start” on
us. God is absolutely sovereign, “the Other,” not simply “Another.”

For these concepts of God, our best, most dedicated, and rigorous intellectual exploration can only scratch the surface of what God really is.

Sometimes in a single belief system, gods can take on different sorts of forms, ranging from fairly human-like to abstract. In anthropologist Emma Cohen’s descriptions of the Afro-Brazilian spiritualists’ beliefs she studied in northern Brazil, we see great diversity in how the orixás (spirits or gods) are conceived. As the spirits of deceased ancestors living in a spirit world largely identical to our own, many orixás look and act just like humans. “The gods that feature in these stories display very humanlike manners in their social dealings with one another, acting on the basis of their desires and whims. Jealousy, vengeance, bad blood, and trickery color the conniving between the characters of this Elysian soap opera.”

One of Cohen’s informants saw the orixás as including some that are human-like in form and behavior and some as more abstract:

But I saw the form of the orixás to be very black human beings . . . some strong and other things, some bodies were model-like and others not . . . I discovered that the orixás are also forces of nature, and they are also present with us all times. I discovered that there are orixás that participated in the creation of the world, and for having done heroic feats, they had the privilege of becoming orixás—kings, queens, founders of cities. So, really the orixá is everything that we can see and that we can feel.

. . . I also discovered that they have qualities and flaws—some are very similar to human beings in that they both get things right and commit errors.

Human beings or forces of nature? “The Other”? Can adults believe in just about any sort of god they can dream up? Perhaps, the sky’s the limit—or maybe not even the sky.

WHAT ADULTS BELIEVE WHEN THEY ARE NOT WATCHING THEMSELVES

One reason to investigate childhood religion is that we are interested in children in their own right. Another reason for turning our gaze to the early years is that we can sometimes get insights into the adult situation by looking at from where we came. This early developing natural religion is not simply something we replace with adult theologies. Rather, it continues to exert an influence on how we think and act religiously throughout life. Adults are not impervious to the influences of maturatively natural cognition as manifest in natural religion.

Perhaps for any given person at any one moment in time, we cannot easily limit human religious imagination. In general, however, adults are not unfettered. Though someone might sincerely believe that God is the unknowable, indescribable, wholly transcendent otherness that is reality outside time and existing in an infinite number of dimensions of reality, this concept of God hurts my head. I cannot make sense of it and consequently cannot really use it (at least in a practical sense), even if I wanted to. Maybe I am unusually dense, but I have
a feeling that I am not alone in having genuine limitations on what I can understand and believe. Fortunately, too, I have some experimental evidence that backs up my hunch.

Collaborators and I conducted a series of experiments in which we contrasted what adults said they believed about God with how they thought about God in a less reflective, real-time situation—understanding stories. The inspiration for these studies was the sense that adults, even theologically savvy ones, do not always seem to use these theology-sophisticated theological concepts all the time. Spend time around believers in God—God with no location, no human-like form, outside time—and you will hear them say things like, “When I went through that ordeal, I felt like the Lord was walking right beside me,” or “Sometimes when I pray, I imagine myself embraced in God’s arms.” This sort of language suggests a conception of God far more human-like and far less abstract than what theologians sometimes produce and believers affirm. Perhaps, however, these are just relational metaphors, figures of speech meant to convey a feeling or image but not really indicative of how people really think about God. Determining how people think about God in real-time ordinary situations only on the basis of the language people use is tricky. For this reason, collaborators and I conducted several experiments to try to clarify matters.

Stories present a wonderful opportunity for uncovering what readers or listeners bring to the stories themselves, a way of indirectly tapping their thoughts and intuitions. The reason stories are so effective in this way is that they are always incomplete. They have gaps that we often do not even notice. No storyteller can relay all the details in a story. If I say, “Once there was a girl named Cinderella who lived with her wicked stepmother and two stepsisters,” you immediately (and probably unknowingly) fill in all of the details you know about girls, wickedness, stepmothers, stepsisters, and so on. If people did not automatically fill in all that they know, the story would never get off the ground. The storyteller would have to say things such as, “Once there was a girl—oh, a girl is the female of the human species usually before reaching reproductive and physical maturity and characterized by a diminutive stature relative to the mature form of both the male and female adult human . . .” If you’ve ever told a story that is not entirely age appropriate to an inquisitive child, you know what I mean. It takes a lot of background information to understand any story.

Cognitive psychologists—those who study memory and thought—have shown that adults easily and automatically fill in the gaps in stories to the point that they actually misremember what was in the original story as being more complete than it was in some ways. That is, we use our current knowledge to elaborate or distort what is presented.

The most famous psychological research demonstrating these sorts of intrusion errors and related distortions was that of Frederic Bartlett. Bartlett presented British university students with an unfamiliar Native American story, “The War of the Ghosts,” and then asked them to retell it to another person, who retold it to another person, who retold it to another person, and so on—like a game of telephone. Among Bartlett’s many observations about how the story was remembered was that there was a strong tendency for hearers to distort or insert information that fit their own preconceptions. So people in a canoe became people in a rowboat. Less comfortable or familiar
to drown and so he began to struggle and pray. Though God was answering another prayer in another part of the world when the boy started praying, before long God responded by pushing one of the rocks so the boy could get his leg out. The boy struggled to the river bank and fell over exhausted.\(^{25}\)

The questions we sought to answer with stories such as this one were, Just what kind of idea of God do listeners or readers use to make sense of the story? Is it the same as what they say they believe about God?

To answer these questions, we asked memory questions after our participating adults listened to the stories. (We encouraged the listeners to use their own concept of God as much as possible and directly asked them a number of questions about what properties they thought God has.) Because we were particularly looking for intrusion errors—instances when people remembered something that was not in the story—we asked: “Which of the following pieces of information were included in the story?” Listeners answered simply yes if they remembered it being in the story or no if they did not remember it. We assured our participants that the wording did not have to be exact. Some of the items checked for general memory of the story—for instance, “The boy was swimming alone.” (Do not look back at the passage. Yes or no?) The other items checked for intrusion errors related to ideas about God. For instance, one item read, “God had just finished answering another prayer when God helped the boy.” (Was that in the story? Yes or no?)

What we found using stories and questions like these is that listeners’ intrusion errors revealed that they used a very
human-like, or anthropomorphic, understanding of God to make sense of the stories. Did God just finish answering another prayer when God helped the boy? “Yes” was the most common answer. But look again at the story and remember that “God” means someone that can do any number of things anywhere at the same time. Does the story really say that God finished doing one thing and then did another? Couldn’t the story be understood as God continuing to answer the prayer in another part of the world while beginning to help the boy in the tree? Sure it could. When we substituted space aliens with superpowers for God in the same stories with a different group of adults, they did not make these kinds of intrusion errors at any higher rate than other kinds of mistakes. But there is something about understanding the story with an all-present, all-powerful, nonanthropomorphic God. At least when trying to use our idea of God in these kinds of tasks, a very human-like concept of God seems easier, more natural.

We conducted these experiments with adults living in the United States from many different religious backgrounds and commitments. Some participants did not believe in God and had to be asked to use their ideas about the God in which they do not believe. (This is not as strange as it sounds. You might not believe in dragons, but you probably have a lot of ideas about what a dragon is.) Across all groups—believers or nonbelievers, Christians or Jews, Catholics or Protestants—everyone showed the same pattern of intrusion errors. They understood God (but not the carefully described space aliens) as human-like in the stories, but denied that they believed God to be human-like in the same ways when asked directly. In the stories, they incorrectly remembered God as being in one place, but when asked directly, they claimed God was everywhere or nowhere. In the stories, they incorrectly remembered God as having to do one thing at a time, but claimed God could do any number of things at once when asked directly. The God in the stories could be interrupted, could have vision blocked, and could fail to hear something because of competing noise. Participants explicitly denied all of these limitations on God.

Concerned that listening to the stories and the accompanying comprehension questions somehow unfairly pushed a more anthropomorphic God concept than people might otherwise use, we tried a version of the task in which adults read the stories themselves and then answered the questions. Same results. We also tried a task in which adults read some stories and then wrote out their own paraphrased versions. Sure enough, the anthropomorphic intrusion errors cropped up again.

Once after I presented this in a public lecture, a fellow psychologist who happened to be the wife of an Orthodox rabbi asked me, “What did you expect?” How else would people think about God under these conditions? Of course we need to use a simpler, more familiar idea of God sometimes.

Exactly. The reason I present these experimental results is that they demonstrate that in a sense, adults may actually have two or more different sets of ideas about God: one set is the fancier theological set about an all-present, all-knowing, and radically different kind of being that comes up in reflective situations; the other is the one that looks much more like a human and is easier to use in real-time situations. Ideas that deviate too far from our natural conceptual tendencies are difficult to use.

To learn whether these experimental results were peculiar to American adults, I traveled to India, a wonderful place of
This forty-six-year age range allowed me to investigate whether the gap between stated beliefs about a god and the god concept used changed with age. To my surprise, I found a statistically reliable change—in the opposite direction of what I expected. The gap grew wider with age. Not surprisingly, adults tended to anthropomorphize God less than children in stated beliefs on the questionnaire, but they anthropomorphized more than children during the story comprehension task. Older participants made more intrusion errors suggesting that the gods have human-like limitations. These studies have recently been replicated in a much more rigorous and culturally sensitive manner by Travis Chilcott and Ray Paloutzian.27 Again, older Hindus were more anthropomorphic in the story task than younger ones, independent of education or adult religious training.

More research on this topic would be helpful, but it looks as though children might actually be more nimble in their religious thought than adults in some cases—that the older we are, the less able we are to use ideas on the go that deviate too far from natural religion. This possibility converges with the idea of a sensitive period for religious development that I introduced in the previous chapter. Perhaps children lose natural facility in religious thought if they fail to adequately exercise it from an early age.

When I was a graduate student I had a friend who frequently referred to God as the “Big Guy in the sky.” Sounds pretty childish, doesn’t it? This cheekiness was not meant in any sacrilegious way, but indicated how comfortable this young man felt with God. He considered God a close friend as well as the ruler of the cosmos. This engineering student enjoyed reading
It's Okay to Be Childish

Is belief in God or gods infantile or childish? In certain respects, the answer is clearly yes. Belief in gods is likely to arise early in the development of a child. Before mastering riding a bicycle, knowing the boiling point of water or how to multiply, and even before learning how to read, children all over the globe already know about and believe in the supernatural beings talked about by their parents: ghosts, forest spirits, ancestor spirits, angels, devils, gods, or God. The tendency to believe in at least one superpowerful, superknowing, superperceiving, morally concerned God appears to be part of normal human child development before age five. Regarding a certain belief as infantile, however, bears little on whether we should continue to hold the belief in adulthood.
I presented some of the ideas in this book to an audience at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in autumn 2006. During the lively discussion session after the formal lecture, the audience seemed especially interested in the notion that the foundations of belief, or even belief itself, arise naturally during the preschool years. As I affirmed this interpretation of the evidence to date, a gentleman near the front asked pointedly, “Doesn’t this mean that belief in God is childish?” The remarkably polite audience gasped in astonishment at what they regarded as a cheeky or even hostile question. But it was a fair question.

The question of whether belief in God (or any other superhuman agents) is childish, infantile, or some kind of residue of childhood naïveté arises repeatedly when the nature of belief is discussed. Isn’t God the same as Santa Claus or the tooth fairy, a being that children believe in but then really should outgrow?

**ATTACKS ON RELIGION FOR BEING CHILDLISH**

One of the most famous versions of the religion-as-infantile argument was developed by Sigmund Freud. Multiple times in his book *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud voices his insistence that belief in gods arises as childhood anxiety projected onto the natural world:

Now when the child grows up and finds that he is destined to remain a child for ever, and that he can never do without protection against unknown and mighty powers,

he invests these with the traits of the father-figure; he creates for himself the gods, of whom he is afraid, whom he seeks to propitiate, and to whom he nevertheless entrusts the task of protecting him.

According to Freud, adults retain the childlike fear of unknown forces and invent a god to serve as a cosmic father figure, reflecting the early childhood need to be protected by their father but simultaneously afraid of him.

Freud’s analysis does not stop with any given individual child or any individual developmental course from childhood into adulthood. Rather, he is out to explain why it is that belief in gods is a human universal. To do so, he offers that the developmental story he promotes merely reenacts on the individual level a problem that humanity in general has faced from its origins as a species:

And so a rich store of ideas is formed, born of the need to make tolerable the helplessness of man, and built out of the material offered by memories of the helplessness of his own childhood and the childhood of the human race.

To sum, Freud sees belief in gods as infantile or childish to the core. We believe in gods because we carry around anxiety in the face of natural forces beyond our control. We cope with this anxiety by inventing a being or beings with the properties we attributed to our fathers during early childhood. We remember (if only unconsciously) feeling protected by a powerful but frightening father when we were infants. We use this infantile memory (again, unconsciously) to create a god concept. But
Born Believers

Freud goes one step further: belief in gods is an infantile illusion and an ancient one at that:

Similarly man makes the forces of nature not simply in the image of men with whom he can associate as his equals—that would not do justice to the overpowering impression they make on him—but he gives them the characteristics of the father, makes them into gods, thereby following not only an infantile, but also, as I have tried to show, a phylogenetic prototype.

By “phylogenetic” Freud means that gods are not only primitive in terms of individual human development but also a residue of our primitive, prehistoric ancestry. Crudely put, we get belief in gods from our cavemen ancestors, maybe even from prehuman species. Belief in god is infantile and prehuman.

Not many psychologists or other scientists of religion take seriously Freud’s evidence-thin account of the origins of religious thought, but the idea that belief in gods is something embarrassingly childish has never completely gone away. To take an illustrative example, Richard Dawkins adopts a religion-as-infantile stance in some recent interviews and writings. Here is an illustrative example of Dawkins’s perspective from an interview he gave in 2006:

I do care passionately about what’s true. One major difference between Santa Claus and God, obviously, is that no adult believes in Santa Claus, and unfortunately a great many adults believe in God. It’s about time they grew up, and toss God aside at about the same age that they toss Santa Claus aside. If there are some people who are distressed by a loss of faith, I would encourage them to hang in there, because if you really stand up and look the real world squarely in the face, it does turn out to be a much more wonderful place than the sort of make-believe, childish world of religion.

For Dawkins as well as Freud, belief in God or gods is childish and people should grow up and “toss God aside.”

Labeling religious beliefs and practices as childish and thereby concluding that they should be abandoned on that basis amounts to nothing more than persuasive but empty rhetoric.

The common comparison with Santa Claus and the tooth fairy betrays disingenuousness, intellectual laziness, or serious ignorance. For starters, adults believe in God but not Santa and the tooth fairy, whereas young children may believe in all three. In fact, as scientist-theologian Alister McGrath has pointed out, many adults (himself included) come to believe in a particular god after having not believed as children. This fact too is a point of incongruity with the cases of Santa Claus and the tooth fairy. People do not begin or resume believing in them in adulthood after not believing in them as children. Santa Claus and the tooth fairy also fail to fit the conceptual space that children (and adults) have because of their natural cognition. Santa Claus and the tooth fairy do not readily account for perceived order and purpose in the world, for great fortune and misfortune, for matters concerning morality, life, death, and the afterlife, and they have little relevance in day-to-day matters outside their very limited ranges of concern (Christmas presents and the tooth-for-money exchange). Note, too, that parents delib-
I favor the approach that regards our minds as basically trustworthy to deliver true beliefs and that our naturally arising "childish" beliefs should be regarded as true until we have good reason to suspect them as being problematic. It is not clear to me that we can do otherwise and still function as normal, sane human beings. So much of our core knowledge and guiding values arise during childhood and shape our lives. We should trust these "childish" beliefs as innocent until proven guilty. A Darwinian atheist may reply that there are other good reasons to the contrary of belief in many, if not all, gods. Perhaps so. But the discovery that theism is "childish" is not one of those good reasons.

Do bear in mind too that just because an idea or belief does not typically arise in childhood but waits until adulthood does not make the belief true. If you consider belief in gods to be "immature" or "childish" because of its early development history during the life span, then keep in mind that many "mature" or "adult" beliefs bear no advantages over childhood beliefs in terms of truth, value, or desirability. Adults come up with scientific theories and philosophical positions that we later discard as false or unhelpful. A child never believes that nothing really exists except the self or that there is no external world or that we are brains in a vat somewhere. Adults try on these kinds of beliefs. Adults thought that tobacco smoking and consumption of narcotics are harmless and enjoyable pastimes and that bleeding people or cutting holes in their skulls are good treatment for mood disorders. Children do not come up with stuff like that. Adults are more inclined to believe that killing themselves or someone else is a good idea. You would be hard pressed to find a five-year-old agreeing with you under
any conditions. Adults may be more knowledgeable than children and perhaps cleverer, but in addition to being more right, this means adults can be more wrong.

By raising these issues, I mean only to show that whether a belief is “childish” in the sense of emerging in early childhood has no immediate bearing on whether it is true or good. It may be that it is most prudent to treat childhood beliefs as innocent until proven guilty.

VIRTUOUS CHILDLISHNESS?

Is belief in God or gods infantile or childish? In certain respects the answer is clearly yes. Belief in gods is likely to arise early in the development of a child. As I hope I have demonstrated thus far, the cognitive tools needed to get belief in gods off the ground are in place during the preschool years.

Regarding a belief as infantile, however, bears little on whether we should continue to hold the belief in adulthood. Once the rhetorical name-calling is stripped away, one can see that having foundations in childhood is irrelevant to whether a belief is true or false. Calling a belief infantile or childish amounts to nothing more than name-calling, a cheap trick for trying to scare someone away from the belief.

Jesus appeared to have little fear of this guilt by association with children. Rather, when his followers tried to shoo away children, he reportedly replied by saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” He regarded something about childishness as a welcome, and not shameful, attribute.

In his followers. Exactly what Jesus regarded as the desirable trait or traits that children possess is an open theological question. Humility is a likely part of the answer, for in another episode Jesus explained, “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Maybe, too, author G. K. Chesterton was on the right track when he wrote that children possess an “unsplendid realism” that enables them to see things as they really are—to see the good, bad, puzzling, disturbing, or miraculous for what it is instead of adding adult-like layers of rationalization and self-delusion or fancy theoretical gloss that makes things appear other than they are. Instead, Chesterton suggests that to properly understand and believe about God, adults need to “invoke the most wild and soaring sort of imagination; the imagination that can see what is there.” Or perhaps Jesus referred to the way in which children seem able to receive positive regard, gifts, and even forgiveness without feeling embarrassed or indebted to the benefactor. Could this be part of the humility he valued? For adults, grace and graciousness may go against the grain of our embedded senses of proper social exchange or of a just world (as I developed in the previous chapter). Perhaps Jesus meant to emphasize children’s ability to trust unwaveringly, not needing to understand all of the hows or whys but only needing to understand the who. Whatever Jesus was driving at in saying that his followers should become like little children, he refused to be shamed by accusations of his followers as being childish in their belief.