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FORUM:
GOD, SCIENCE, AND HISTORICAL EXPLANATION

3.

HISTORIOGRAPHY WITHOUT GOD: A REPLY TO GREGORY¹

TOR EGIL FØRLAND

ABSTRACT

This reply aims both to respond to Gregory and to move forward the debate about God's place in historiography. The first section is devoted to the nature of science and God. Whereas Gregory thinks science is based on metaphysical naturalism with a methodological corollary of critical-realist empiricism, I see critical, empiricist methodology as basic, and naturalism as a consequence. Gregory's exposition of his apophatic theology, in which univocity is eschewed, illustrates the fissure between religious and scientific worldviews—no matter which basic scientific theory one subscribes to. The second section is allotted to miracles. As I do, Gregory thinks no miracle occurred on Fox Lakes in 1652, but he restricts himself to understanding the actors and explaining change over time, and refuses to explain past or contemporary actions and events. Marc Bloch, in his book *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, is willing to go much further than Gregory. Using his superior medical knowledge to substitute his own explanation of the phenomenon for that of the actors, Bloch dismisses the actors' beliefs that they or others had been miraculously cured, and explains that they believed they saw miraculous healing because they were expecting to see it. In the third section, on historical explanation, I rephrase the question whether historians can accommodate both believers in God and naturalist scientists, asking whether God, acting miraculously or not, can be part of the ideal explanatory text. I reply in the negative, and explicate how the concept of a plural subject suggests how scientists can also be believers. This approach may be compatible with two options presented by Peter Lipton for resolving the tension between religion and science. The first is to see the truth claims of religious texts as untranslatable into scientific language (and *vice versa*); the other is to immerse oneself in religious texts by accepting them as a guide but not believing in their truth claims when these contradict science.

To have the opportunity to debate God, science, and historical explanation with such a learned scholar as Brad Gregory is a pleasure in which I take great pride. It is even more gratifying to find that we agree on many of the main points. We agree that science is the best way to attain knowledge of the physical world, and that scientific theories are to be preferred over literal interpretations of biblical descriptions when the two are incompatible (Gregory, 505; 514-515).² We agree that science cannot disprove the existence of God—depending, of course, on the

1. In drafting this response I have benefited from communication with C. Behan McCullagh and Hanne Monclair.

2. Brad Gregory, "No Room for God? History, Science, Metaphysics, and the Study of Religion," *History and Theory* 47 (December 2008), 495-519 (this issue). Page references are in parentheses.

conception of the divine. We agree that my presentation of the relationship between scientific explanations and miracles represents the overwhelming majority view among contemporary scientists (496, 499, 517). We agree that historians should not satisfy themselves with explaining evidence but ought to extend their inquiry into what really happened (510). These are not trivial areas of agreement. On a more specific matter, we further agree that the survival of Anders and Ola Engebretsen in 1652, which the brothers attributed to God's agency through the provision for twelve days of fresh, edible plants on barren ground, probably has a naturalistic explanation (513-514). For the record I shall also state that I agree with Gregory that his *Salvation at Stake* is a fine book, well deserving its many awards (515).³

Yet disagreements and unresolved questions remain. My take on the basic assumptions of science differs from Gregory's, and I confess bewilderment *vis-à-vis* his apophatic explication of God and the implications of this theology for the relationship between science and religion. These issues are the subject of section I. Section II is devoted to miracles and their explanation in historiography. While a miracle was the point of departure for my first article in this Forum,⁴ the broader and more important issue is how historians and other social scientists should explain actions and events that religious actors consider to have been brought about or guided by divine intervention. To put it in a slightly different way, the issue is whether there is room for supernatural concepts within social-scientific explanations. I contend there is not. This gives rise to the further question of the implications for communication between scientists and believers, and to the issue of how religious scholars can avoid conflict between their work and their beliefs. I discuss these matters in section III.

I. CONCEPTIONS OF GOD AND SCIENCE

Gregory thinks we agree that "two central assumptions frame the practice of the natural sciences" (506). The first is "the methodological postulate of metaphysical naturalism, which entails that for science to be science, by definition it can pursue, identify, and entertain only natural causes as plausible explanations of natural phenomena, with the universe as a whole regarded as if it were a closed system of natural causes." The second he terms "an epistemological corollary to the postulate of metaphysical naturalism," namely "critical-realist empiricism," which "entails that for science to be science, by definition it can examine only what can be observed, investigated, verified, and (in principle) falsified through empirical methods as an extension of human sense perception." On this basis Gregory claims that science can say nothing about "the transcendent God of traditional Christian theology," and pronounces as a "spectacular category mistake" my observation that "'the realm of the supernatural has so far been inaccessible empirically'" (506).

3. Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999).

4. Tor Egil Følrand, "Acts of God? Miracles and Scientific Explanation," *History and Theory* 47 (December 2008), 483-494 (this issue).

Two remarks are in order. First, I think Gregory has the relation between his two central assumptions wrong. At the very least, I do not share his notion of critical-realist empiricism as a corollary to metaphysical naturalism. I consider systematic, critical empiricism primary, as the methodological foundation of science.⁵ The only metaphysics underlying this methodological basis is the belief that there is something somewhere that somehow prompts the perceptions we turn into observation statements. From this—and not from *a priori* reasoning—follows naturalism, which I have admittedly called a basic working hypothesis.

Second, our conception of the world—including the concept of the world itself as well as our notion of the supernatural and the relation of this realm to the natural or physical world—is a linguistic and historical construct. The dichotomization of the world into a natural and a supernatural realm was a thirteenth-century development to accommodate old notions of God with new ideas about the (now “natural”) world that worked with law-like regularity.⁶ This marked the end—or rather the end of the beginning—of a process that had been in progress at least since Augustine distinguished among three levels of wonders. The first level consisted of wonderful “acts of God visible daily and discerned by wise men as signs of God’s goodness.”⁷ In the thoroughly naturalized conception of the world with which we live today, it takes a poetic genius like Polish Nobel Laureate Wisława Szymborska to notice such “common miracles” as the fact that “a small and airy cloud / is able to upstage the massive moon,” and juxtapose it with an “extra miracle, extra and ordinary: / the unthinkable / can be thought.”⁸ Szymborska is much too modern to impute such events to God, however. Augustine’s second level, so closely related to the first that they eventually merged, consisted of “wonders provoked in the ignorant, who did not understand the workings of nature and therefore could be amazed by what to the wise man was not unusual.” Only the third level contained what were later seen as genuine miracles: “unusual manifestations of the power of God.”⁹ As more events lent themselves to causal (that is, “natural”) explanation, proto-scientists such as Adelard of Bath turned to the notion of miracles for the explanation of contemporary events only as a last resort, after causal explanations had failed.¹⁰

Awareness of the historicity of the concepts by means of which we comprehend the world need not entail our discarding the possibility that new concepts divide the world for us in more useful ways than did the older concepts. The diminishing

5. I follow Gregory’s terminology here, using “empiricism” in a general sense as opposed to speculative endeavors. I do not intend it to denote the opposition between “realists,” who claim that theoretical entities exist, and “empiricists,” who abstain from claiming real existence for inobservables, as described, for example, in Bas C. van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980).

6. Alexander Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 9–12; Robert Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 12–18.

7. Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event 1000–1215*, revised edition (Aldershot, UK: Scolar Press, 1987), 3–4.

8. Wisława Szymborska, “Miracle Fair,” in *idem, View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, transl. Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh (San Diego, CA and New York: Harcourt, 1995), 165–166.

9. Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, 4.

10. *Ibid.*, 23–24.

role for God as an active presence in the natural world was concomitant with the increasing ability of humans to explain and predict events. Since the dawn of the modern era (another linguistic and historical construct that nevertheless may be useful), God has become ever less relevant for the explanation of natural phenomena. Unless the concept of divinity, properly changed in accordance with the new circumstances, could find employment in a supernatural realm in which it could mysteriously (and perhaps miraculously) influence the physical world, life after death—itself a notion not immune from scientific attack—would seem to be all that was left for which the divine was responsible.

The construction of the supernatural realm as a location for God and other immaterial entities provides the divine with a sanctuary outside the natural world. Like Taiwan for Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese nationalists after 1949, here the deity is safe from the advance of natural science. But safety carries a price, namely a lack of influence on the affairs of the material mainland. Galileo, Darwin, and the rest of the army of scientists—many or most of them pious men—have made God redundant in explanations of this-worldly or “natural” events. Philosophers and theologians have had a hard time describing how an immaterial or “transcendent” God can influence matter. I cannot see that Gregory's article moves the debate on these questions forward—though I admit that would be much to ask for.

Gregory's God has not found a safe but irrelevant haven in a supernatural Taiwan. Nor is he still on the material mainland. He is nowhere—or rather, he is all over the place: here, there, and everywhere, except he is neither “he” (because how can something that is “inconceivable in spatial categories” or “not spatial at all” be gendered?) nor *is* he in any normal sense of being (503-504). All the same he has created the earth and everything else in the natural world (503; 508-510), and could easily make miracles “if it served his purpose” (510). I am not writing this ironically, but I readily confess my inability to make sense of this God speak. What *is* ironic is that this inability of mine in a way just underscores Gregory's point, since his “biblical God as understood in traditional Christianity” cannot be described, not even comprehended, linguistically, so radical is “God's transcendent incomprehensibility” (508). The “God of traditional Christian theology” (506) needs no room, is transcendent, immanent, real, unimaginable, almighty, loving, actively present, and indescribable: to me this plethora of properties is—surprise—incomprehensible.

Gregory's description of God—or rather and especially, his insistence on “God's incomprehensibility in relationship to the nature of language,” whether the language be “religious, theological, philosophical, or scientific” (504)—is rooted in the apophatic theology exemplified by the Cappadocian Church Fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa (335–394). This demands that the divine only be alluded to, in metaphorical language: God is love, etc. This allows Christians to speak of what cannot be linguistically comprehended instead of adopting Wittgenstein's conclusion in the *Tractatus*: “*Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.*”¹¹ The license given by the metaphorical option apparently is wide,

11. “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ogden bilingual edition (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922), chap. 7, <http://www.kfs.org/~jonathan/witt/t7de.html> (accessed October 13, 2008).

leading Gregory to assert that “if God is real and created the entire universe *ex nihilo*, there is no good reason to think that he could not . . . manage to make a few plants grow more rapidly than usual or raise a crucified man from the dead” (510).

Gregory’s apophatic, metaphorical Godspeak bestows great advantages upon its user. It allows him to affirm God’s greatness, power, and so on, while at the same time to insist that God is indescribable. But every pleasure has an edge of pain, and here the pain manifests itself in a lack of meaning: or rather, an overflow of meaning, since in a logically consistent language the properties of Gregory’s God seem to collide head-on with his indescribability and indeed infathomability. Gregory has his defense ready, however: my unease with his theological idiom stems from my insistence on a univocal conception of being, traceable to John Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and other thirteenth- and fourteenth-century scholars (501-502). Standing unwittingly on the conceptual shoulders of these men, I and the great majority of scientists become a sort of squarehead, unable to comprehend the analogical concept of Being that was taught by Henry of Ghent, and thus unable to appreciate the transcendent God of traditional Christianity.

I plead guilty to this accusation: that is, I insist that univocity is a precondition for rational argumentation. My reason for siding with Scotus is the converse of Gregory’s for denouncing him, namely, that the alternative to univocity is equivocation. Without univocity, contradiction is impossible: the meaning of concepts would be in perennial flux.¹² The damage done to academic discussion by a lack of univocity will be known to everyone who has tried to debate with poststructuralists of a Derridaean bent who never allow stable definitions of the concepts they use, but insist on perpetual *différance*. Since Gregory elsewhere (505, note 19) comes across as very much opposed to poststructuralists, I would think he ought to appreciate the demerits of straying from univocal concepts. As Gregory comes close to noticing (502), modern science, which is based on the possibility of contradiction, is inconceivable without univocity. But apparently he thinks God is so utterly incomprehensible and hence indescribable that anything but equivocation is misplaced.

The consequences of not accepting univocity as a premise for the discourse about God is well illustrated by Gregory’s assertion that “every *possible* finding of natural science is compatible with a notion of God whose radical otherness is precisely the possibility condition of his presence throughout the physical world” (509-510, italics in original). I wonder if this really is correct, at least if this God is thought to have some similarity to the God of the Bible, who, according to most interpretations of the New Testament, was incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth. The vast majority of Christians think Jesus somehow rose from the dead after his crucifixion—and not just metaphorically. I can think of a number of *possible* scientific findings incompatible with this resurrection, for example the discovery of documents showing either that his disciples had stolen the corpse from the grave and buried it somewhere else, or that he never died, but escaped to India.

12. See R. J. Kilcullan, “Scotus on Univocal Concepts of God,” <http://www.humanities.mq.edu.au/Ockham/z3601.html> (accessed October 13, 2008).

We are now in a position to evaluate Gregory's criticism of my claim that there have been "no successful attempts to unite, in a logically consistent language, the competing worldviews of science and religion—religion defined in a substantive way, as entailing belief in supernatural beings or powers that can influence the course of events in the material world" (Førland, 484; cf. Gregory, 497-498). I concede that the dichotomy of the natural versus the supernatural realm is epistemologically consequential. But then again so is every conception of the world. Where I cannot follow Gregory is when he ends his exposition of the difficulties of scientists to agree on one, unified basic theory of the physical universe by lamenting that I ought not to fault believers for their inability to unite religious and scientific worldviews when scientists cannot find agreement among themselves. For the time being—indeed, maybe forever—scientists have to live with competing, perhaps incompatible, theories of the ultimate composition of matter. But competition among rival basic theories that share a scientific worldview only gives believers a somewhat larger range of theories with which they can try to make their religious worldviews fit. For most, if not all, religious claims, including all miracles that have been claimed so far, it matters less whether one opts for general relativity or quantum mechanics. Did the Red Sea part if we think of the world as constituted according to general relativity but not according to quantum mechanics? Did Lazarus rise from the dead? Such questions illustrate how misplaced is Gregory's concern for scientific disagreement regarding theories on ultimate matters. Moreover, that the quest for a unified, basic theory has not succeeded (yet) is no license to set aside logical consistency. As we see from his discussion of the nature of God, the metaphorical, analogical idiom in which Gregory prefers to talk about God, and which is his way of making God and science compatible, is an idiom that is based on equivocation. It is unfair to place such programmatic inconsistency on a par with scientific endeavors to find a single, unifying theory. Gregory's *Godspeak* leaves his notion of the divine impossible to contradict. As such it is a non-starter in academic discourse.

II. MIRACLES

The issue at the heart of "Acts of God?," my initial article in this Forum, is whether it is possible for historians to accommodate both scientific and religious worldviews so they can explain purported acts of God in a way that is acceptable to, and can be found meaningful and relevant to, religious believers as well as scientists. Most of the time such dual accommodation or reconciliation is unproblematic, since scientific and religious worldviews overlap, or at least do not conflict, on the vast majority of issues and areas. We are able to describe and explain most political, social, economic, and technological matters in ways that are accepted by, say, atheists, Baptists, or Hindus alike. When it comes to supernatural matters, however, tensions arise. When believers in supernatural beings or powers refer to the influence or actions of such entities when explaining events in the natural world, they transgress the boundaries of empirical science, which is unable to include supernatural forces or entities in its descriptions of the world. Then historians face the challenge of explaining events in ways that are scientifically

acceptable as well as respecting of believers' ontology. I claim there is no way out of this dilemma.

The dilemma of accommodating religious as well as scientific worldviews is not restricted to descriptions of miracles. God purportedly works in a multitude of ways, most of them non-miraculous. When I took a miracle report as my point of departure in "Acts of God," it was because miracles, defined as Providential exceptions to natural laws (under properly specified conditions), lie at the intersection between scientific and religious worldviews. Yet they are only the most conspicuous part of a long continuum of acts of God in the natural world. Having instigated a miracle debate, however, I must pay for my recklessness by responding to Gregory's views on miracles before focusing on the broader issues.

Let me start with what Gregory and I agree probably was no miracle, namely, the survival of the Engebretsen brothers stranded on the Fox Lakes in 1652. Whereas this event admittedly is of minor importance except to those involved, it is perhaps of some methodological interest. If we are to believe the versions of the story written by local priests in, respectively, 1732 and 1743—and there is no good reason not to believe them on this point—the brothers explained their survival by pointing to the intervention of God, who reportedly had provided them with fresh, edible violas even on ground where no plants supposedly could grow because the soil had been removed the previous day. Asserting the possibility that God works miracles, but distrusting the accuracy of the brothers' testimony, Gregory concludes that the event probably did not occur as explained by the brothers.

Having explained away the miracle on Fox Lakes, we can move on to areas of dispute. I think Hume's view on miracles has been less devastated by recent criticism than Gregory asserts (513), but since my analysis is not dependent on the correct interpretation of Hume, there is no need to split hairs on this matter.¹³ More critical is our disagreement about whether, when explaining purported miracles, we should substitute our scientifically based ontology for the supernaturally infused religious ontology of our objects of study. Gregory is adamant in his refusal to substitute his ontology for theirs (517). I contend there is no way around such substitution if we want to explain events in the past or present world, including the actions of believers and their speech acts such as explanations, in a way that makes sense to us. Marc Bloch, in his study of the reputed ability of medieval and early modern English and French monarchs to cure subjects of scrofula by their "royal touch," states flatly that "hardly anyone nowadays would dream of invoking [supernatural causes] in the matter under discussion." Continuing that "it is obviously not good enough simply to reject the ancient interpretation [that the kings were blessed with healing powers] out of hand because it is repugnant to reason," Bloch asserts that "we must try to discover and substitute a new interpretation acceptable to reason. This is a delicate task; yet to avoid it would be

13. Gregory seems to be unaware of Robert J. Fogelin, *A Defense of Hume on Miracles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), deemed by Terence Penelhum in his review in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* as "indispensable for anyone who wants to take the measure of [Hume's] argument." *NDPR*, Jan. 4, 2004, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=1044> (accessed October 24, 2008). See also Michael Jacovides' review of Fogelin's *Defense* and the books by David Johnson (1999) and John Earman (2000) that form much of the basis for Gregory's verdict on the demerits of Hume's essay (508, note 34), *Philosophical Review* 117 (January 2008), 142-147.

a kind of intellectual cowardice.”¹⁴ Discussing the evidence in light of modern medical knowledge, he concludes that the physician-princes, while not impostors, never healed anyone. “The real problem, then, will be to understand how people believed in their wonder-working power when they did not in fact heal.”¹⁵ Bloch dismisses the testimony of contemporary witnesses and the effectiveness of the royal touch because he applies his superior, scientifically based knowledge. Describing how the notion of miracles abounded in medieval and early modern Europe—“there were no saints who did not have their miraculous exploits; no sacred things or persons without their supernatural powers”—and pointing to the political advantages kings could get from having healing powers bestowed upon them, Bloch moves from understanding the actors he studies to explaining them:

It was noticed that a much-feared disease would sometime yield—or appear to yield—after [the kings] had laid hands, which were almost unanimously considered as sacred, upon it. They could scarcely avoid seeing it in terms of cause and effect and concluding that the looked-for miracle had indeed occurred. What created faith in the miracle was the idea that there was bound to be a miracle. And this was what kept the belief alive, as well as the accumulating witness of the generations down the ages, all those whose testimony, apparently based upon experience, seemed impossible to doubt. As for the probably fairly numerous cases where the disease resisted the touch of the august hands, they were soon forgotten. Such is the happy optimism of believing souls.

Thus it is difficult to see faith in the royal miracle as anything but the result of a collective error.¹⁶

Contrary to Bloch, Gregory shies away from attempting to explain the actions of believers. Instead he “endeavors to understand any and all protagonists on their own terms without imposing any moral or metaphysical views . . . as a prerequisite for the explanation of change over time” (519; see also 516). But change over time is not the only topic for which historians seek explanations. We also strive to explain past actions and events. Some of us would even want to explain more or less contemporary events. Miracles abound on YouTube, and in “Acts of God?” I mention contemporary examples of people—a priest, a princess, and a president—who believe that God and demons are active today as well as long ago. The ambition to explain change over time is misplaced in such cases: what is called for is an explanation of the actions or events as such.

III. EXPLANATION WITHOUT GOD

With miracles behind us, we can turn to the broader question of whether historians or other social scientists can explain, in ways acceptable to believers as well as scientists, actions and events that believers claim were due to the influence of supernatural entities. In “Acts of God?” I suggested that to eschew explanation was Gregory’s way out of the dilemma of reconciling scientific and religious worldviews—or rather, his way of never entering into it. Gregory’s emphatic professing of never having written or thought “that historians of religion should do

14. Marc Bloch, *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, transl. J. E. Anderson [1924] (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 231.

15. *Ibid.*, 238.

16. *Ibid.*, 243.

nothing more than try to understand past people on their own terms” (516, italics in original) indicates that I have misinterpreted his views by ignoring his ambition to explain change over time. I apologize, yet I insist that explaining change over time is very much different from explaining past or contemporary actions and events. Moreover, I find comfort in company. In his otherwise laudatory review of *Salvation at Stake*, Peter Marshall notes that Gregory’s dividing line between “understanding the past (good) and explaining the past (bad)” is not unproblematic, nor is his programmatic self-restriction to the former.¹⁷ Further to my defense, I quote the following lines from Gregory’s 1999 review in this journal of two works in, respectively, microhistory and *Alltagsgeschichte*:

One can *describe and understand* “having faith,” for example, depending on one’s sources; or one can attempt to *explain* it with reference to secular-psychological categories. But one cannot explain and claim still to be understanding past people on their own terms, because in opting for explanation, it is precisely *their* terms—and experiences—that one explains in other categories. What has been insufficiently appreciated is that in the history of religion, these two endeavors are not merely different, but incompatible.¹⁸

In fairness to Gregory and conforming to interpretive charity, it must be added that what he finds incompatible is “to recapture the subjective, qualitative experiences of past men and women in their own terms” (that is, to understand) and “to explain them with tools derived from cultural and social anthropology, or indeed any of the social sciences.”¹⁹ I cannot see, however, that he has presented any alternative to using social-scientific tools in order to explain the thoughts and actions of past people. Indeed, I fail to see what would be the alternatives to using the tools of social science—of course in conjunction with endeavors to understand as best we can how the actors were thinking—when attempting to explain actions that to us seem alien, irrational, or cruel, such as rain dances, mass suicides,²⁰ or the witch hunts of early modern Europe.

Another way of expressing the dilemma of how to reconcile religious and scientific worldviews is to ask whether there is room for the notion of God or other supernatural beings or powers in any scientifically legitimate ideal explanatory text. As I have explained elsewhere, the ideal explanatory text is a theoretical construct that includes accurate information about all due-to relations—causal or of other kinds—that converge in the explanandum.²¹ My own reply to the question of whether the ideal explanatory text can accommodate God is in the negative, since God, like other supernatural entities, is scientifically inaccessible.²² I think

17. Peter Marshall, review of *Salvation at Stake* in *French History* 14 (2000), 352. Marshall’s review is so full of praise that it is quoted at the website of Harvard University Press advertising the book—though not the passage cited here.

18. Brad S. Gregory, “*Is Small Beautiful? Microhistory and the History of Everyday Life*,” review essay, *History and Theory* 38 (February 1999), 100–110, quotation from 107–108, italics in original. See also Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, 8–15.

19. Gregory, “*Is Small Beautiful?*,” 107.

20. For example, the deaths in Jonestown in 1978, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonestown> (accessed October 16, 2008).

21. I take the concept of an ideal explanatory text from Peter Railton; for an introduction and a discussion of its application in historiography, see Tor Egil Førland, “The Ideal Explanatory Text in History: A Plea for Ecumenism,” *History and Theory* 43 (October 2004), 321–340.

22. It should be noticed that our difficulties in observing God is no reason to exclude him from the

Gregory ought to conclude likewise, since in his idiom of traditional Christian theology God is incomprehensible and utterly indescribable in any logically consistent language or semantics. That such a notion of God may be compatible with scientific findings is beside the point, as long as the concept is not part of the ideal explanatory text.

Let us see how the purported miracle on Fox Lakes fares when analyzed against the ideal explanatory text. The presupposition that God did not miraculously provide for the brothers, to which both Gregory and I subscribe, need not entail the exclusion of the divine from the ideal explanatory text for this event. Without working miracles, God might have heard the brothers' prayers and responded by guiding them in his mysterious ways to the right places to look for edible plants, and by seeing to it that the village neighbors arrived in time to save them. Surely something along these lines would be part of the brothers' narrative, even if they were made to doubt the provision miracle. Why shouldn't we, as twenty-first century historians, think that this element of their explanation is part of the ideal explanatory text for this event? I submit that we dismiss it because the moment God becomes an integral part of the narrative, it falls outside of what science considers accurate information about due-to relations, and therefore outside any ideal explanatory text. I further suggest that Gregory is aware of this, and that this awareness is the reason why he refrains from referring to God in his explanation of the event, despite his belief in God's ability to make all kinds of wonders. In order not to be regarded as irrelevant by the scientific community—including other social scientists—historians must abide by its limitations on what there is room for in the ideal explanatory text. And in this text there is no room for God.

To solve the paradox of historians who believe in real, supernatural forces (God) and who practice their beliefs by partaking in various activities (such as praying, attending mass, baptizing) in various arenas (church, charities, religious meetings, and so on), yet refrain from referring to God's influence in their historiographical works, I have employed Margaret Gilbert's notion of a plural subject. In Gilbert's terminology, a plural subject is a social group in which participant agents are ready to act jointly or have a jointly accepted view (a group belief).²³ Examples range from two dancing partners to huge organizations. People can be part of different plural subjects at the same time, and thus possibly also identify themselves with "we"-groups with different aims and with activities informed and circumscribed by different worldviews. This makes it less puzzling why someone can engage in one kind of activity as part of one plural subject—for example, as an active member of the local church, worshipping a God who responds to prayers, guides actions, and perhaps even intervenes personally and, if need be, miraculously in the world if it suits his purpose—concomitant with being part of

ideal explanatory text, since this text abounds with unobservable, theoretical entities from atoms and genes on one extreme of the empiricist–realist continuum to causal powers on the other. Rather, the reason for keeping God out is that no scientifically accepted or even respected theories today refer to God or other supernatural entities in their description of the world.

23. I present Gilbert's concept of a plural subject in Tor Egil Førland, "Mentality as a Social Emergent: Can the *Zeitgeist* Have Explanatory Power?," *History and Theory* 47 (February 2008), 44–56, esp. 49–50.

a scientific community in whose descriptions of the world God is conspicuously absent.

Gregory asserts that he has “never experienced being a ‘plural subject’ whose capacity for ‘multiple partaking’ permits [him] personally to believe in God, but professionally to pretend as though God were not real” (515). This misunderstanding indicates that I should have taken more care to describe the concept of a plural subject, which denotes not a split personality but a group with a “we” identity.²⁴ The critical question, however, is not whether Gregory or other believers think they have to masquerade as atheists when donning academic clothes. At issue is whether scholars, who in other capacities—as individual agents or as what Gilbert terms participant agents in religious plural subjects—believe that God influences worldly matters, suspend this belief when acting *qua* (social) scientists. Suspending belief in supernatural agency does not mean pretending to be atheists; suspension requires only an acceptance that supernatural beings or powers are not part of the ideal explanatory text.

The suggestion that the notion of plural subjects can explain how religious scientists tackle the contradictions between, on the one hand, their religious beliefs in supernatural intervention and, on the other, their inability to refer to supernatural entities in their work *qua* scientists, has similarities with, and may be compatible with, the late philosopher Peter Lipton’s views on the tension between religion and science.²⁵ Lipton, a progressive Jew, recoils from adjusting the content of his religious beliefs to the findings of science by reading the biblical text metaphorically (“the metaphor view”), since large parts of it obviously were intended to be interpreted literally. Nor is he willing to read it as a purely normative text (“the value view”), since that also would mean discarding too much of its obviously factual claims. The same argument militates against the third alternative for adjusting the content of his religious beliefs, what he calls “the selection view,” in which those parts of the Bible are thrown out that on a literal interpretation go against the findings of our best science. Lipton thinks this leaves too much of the text by the wayside.

Instead of changing the contents of his religious beliefs to accommodate science, Lipton suggests he might change the *attitudes* he holds as a believer: not believing different things but believing in a different manner. He discusses two options in this direction. The first is inspired by Thomas Kuhn’s analysis of competing scientific paradigms, the incommensurability of which Kuhn in his later work interprets as a kind of untranslatability.²⁶ Kuhn’s idea is that different theo-

24. Apparently, I should also have taken more care in my initial article to explain the relationship between our deeply held beliefs and truths, since Gregory criticizes me for “magically” converting beliefs into truths when I refer to “accepted scientific beliefs (truths)” (507; see Førland, 492). I think a careful reading of my description of the plausibility criterion in arguments to the best explanation three paragraphs above the passage quoted by Gregory shows that the accusation is unwarranted. Since very little can be known with absolute certainty, epistemologically what we hold as truths about the world are merely beliefs accepted by almost everybody.

25. Peter Lipton, “Science and Religion: The Immersion Solution,” in *Realism and Religion: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. Andrew Moore and Michael Scott (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 31–46.

26. *Ibid.*, 37–40. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); *idem*, *The Road since Structure: Philosophical Essays*,

ries describe the world so differently that beyond a certain point they are no longer comparable because the claims of the one cannot be translated into the language of the other. Although bilingualism is possible, translation is not. On one—Kantian—interpretation of Kuhn, the different concepts the theories use mean they no longer refer to the same phenomenal world, although their noumenal referents are identical. This would seem like a solution that would appeal to believers who think God cannot be described in an idiom commensurable with science:

God might exist, have created the world in a certain way, and then informed us about that creation. At the same time, it may be that, our intellects being what they are, we are unable to take information about the noumena straight, so God ladens the descriptions with a conceptual structure that makes them comprehensible to us and generates a phenomenal world that is their subject.²⁷

Whereas Lipton admits that this is possible, he hesitates to place religious texts so much on a par with scientific discourse as this approach implies. Instead, he describes his preferred solution to the conflicting truth claims of science and religion as “immersion,” building on Bas van Fraassen’s “constructive empiricist” interpretation of science. Here the idea is that scientists need not believe that the theories with which they work are true. They need only accept them as empirically adequate, meaning that what the theories say about observables—both past and future—is accurate; they need not believe as such their theories’ claims about (the existence of) inobservable entities and powers.²⁸ For Lipton, adapting this approach to religious beliefs means a willingness “to enter imaginatively into” the “world” of the religion without having to believe that all its claims are true.²⁹ For his part he “cannot believe that the miracles in the Bible occurred,” since “the factual claims about some of the miracles contradict what our best science tells us about how the world has behaved. Thus acceptance of religion in this sense and belief or even just acceptance of science would still leave us with contradictory beliefs.”³⁰

Lipton’s immersion solution comes dangerously close to the selection view that he discarded because too many of the factual claims of the Bible fail when confronted with scientific findings. The main difference, and the advantage that makes Lipton prefer the immersion solution, is that by allowing a kind of double-think, immersion “preserves the integrity and hence the useful power of the religious text . . . we have the text to use in its full, unexpurgated form, the form in which I believe it can do us the most good as a tool for thinking and for living.”³¹ Allowing practitioners to accept religious texts while withholding belief in them provides Lipton with a way to live with the tension between science and religion: “Some of the claims of religion may conflict with the claims of science. The immersion solution does not aim to remove that inconsistency, but by distinguishing

1970–1993, with an *Autobiographical Interview*, ed. James Conant and John Haugeland (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), esp. chaps. 2, 4 and 11.

27. Lipton, *Science and Religion*, 41.

28. Van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image*, esp. 80–83 and 88.

29. Lipton, *Science and Religion*, 41–42.

30. *Ibid.*, 43.

31. *Ibid.*, 45.

acceptance from belief it finds a way to achieve consistency of belief without effacing incompatibility of content. On this approach, we preserve content by adjusting our attitude towards it.”³²

IV. CONCLUSION

Both Gilbertian hat-changing, as one moves in and out of different plural subjects, and Liptonian doublethink, as one immerses in and surfaces from different worlds, can pose a threat to one’s integrity and internal consistency. If beliefs are held with deep conviction, it may be hard to suspend them. Gregory seems unwilling to accept the consequences of the tension between science and religion. His solution is to refrain from explaining actions and events. Our need as historians to found our descriptions on our own (scientifically based) ontology—if need be, in opposition to the ontology of the actors we study—arises only when we want to explain their actions or events in which they are involved. By aiming merely to understand his objects of study as thoroughly and sympathetically as possible from whatever epistemological distance that separates us from them, and restricting himself to describing their (world)views and explaining how these change over time, Gregory may hope to avoid suspension of belief. “I believe in every area of my life that the God of traditional Christianity is real, along with much else related to this,” he declares (515; see also 516), and the “much else” apparently includes a capacity to influence matters in the (natural) world.

The proof of the pudding lies in the eating. So here is my challenge to Gregory and to those inclined to agree with him. Make full reference to the active—miraculous or less spectacular—influence of God in a work in which you attempt to explain actions or events in the past or contemporary world. Then gauge the reaction of readers in the discipline and the wider scientific community to the integration in your narrative of this significant part of your worldview. My contention is that such a work will meet with a mixture of bemusement and bewilderment. I further contend that whatever other merits it might have—and judging by Gregory’s past writings, they will be many—it will bring its author no scientifically respectable awards. Neither *Salvation at Stake*, nor the other prize-winning works of historians that Gregory cites as examples of scholarship that “falsifies” the claim (attributed to me) that the study of religion must be dominated by “reductionist theories that presuppose metaphysical naturalism derived from univocal theological assumptions” (518), step outside the limits of science by postulating that the events depicted were due to God’s hand. In history as well as in science, God is dead.

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32. *Ibid.*, 46.