

WILEY

Wesleyan University

Acts of God? Miracles and Scientific Explanation

Author(s): Tor Egil Fjørland

Source: *History and Theory*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Dec., 2008), pp. 483-494

Published by: Wiley for Wesleyan University

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25478791>

Accessed: 08-08-2016 17:21 UTC

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

http://www.jstor.org/stable/25478791?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Wiley, Wesleyan University are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *History and Theory*

FORUM: GOD, SCIENCE, AND HISTORICAL EXPLANATION

1.

ACTS OF GOD? MIRACLES AND SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATION¹

TOR EGIL FØRLAND

ABSTRACT

God, at least as an active agent, is excluded from today's scientific worldview—including the worldview of the humanities. This creates a gulf between a godless science and believers in God's active presence in the world, a gulf that I argue is unbridgeable. I discuss the general methodological question from the starting point of a 1652 episode in a Norwegian valley, where God reportedly saved two brothers stranded on an islet by providing just enough fresh, edible plants each day for them to survive until they were found by a search team after twelve days. I resist four temptations to take easy ways out of a real dilemma: whether to accept or dismiss this and similar miracle accounts. The first is to explain evidence and refuse to consider the events about which the evidence reports; the second, to deny that reports of miracles represent a problem since biblical actors and authors lacked Hume's concept of inviolable laws of nature; the third, to become resigned to a putative epistemological gap that renders impossible any dialogue on religion with actors from the early modern period; the fourth, to restrict our studies to asking what the events meant to the historical actors without passing judgment on the truth value of their beliefs. I suggest that when doing historical research, historians are part of a scientific community; consequently, historiographical explanations must be compatible with accepted scientific beliefs. Whereas many historians and natural scientists in private believe in supernatural entities, *qua* professional members of the scientific community they must subscribe to metaphysical naturalism, which is a basic working hypothesis in the empirical quest of science. As long as the supernatural realm is excluded from the scientific worldview, however, historians' explanations of miracles will differ fundamentally from the explanations proffered by believers.

I. INTRODUCTION: OUTLINING THE DILEMMA

At the conference "Secularism and Beyond" in Copenhagen in May 2007, professor of theology at the University of Birmingham Werner Ustorf expressed dismay that participants treated religion "just like any other social phenomenon." Apparently he thought too little focus was given to the transcendental qualities of religion: to the idea—believers might say to the fact—that religion is the ordering of the relation between humans and the supernatural (God).

The theology professor's intervention points to a major methodological issue, namely how social scientists of the twenty-first century, including scholars in historical disciplines, should approach religion and religious beliefs and practices. This is the question I discuss in this essay, taking a report about a miracle from

1. This essay was originally presented as a paper at the Copenhagen Conference on Religion in the 21st Century, Copenhagen University, September 2007.

the seventeenth century as my point of departure. While the case is historical, the issue is of current relevance since supernatural or religious explanations, and acts founded in such beliefs, abound.

Before presenting my historical case I shall sketch what I think is the dilemma of modern scholars of religion. The scientific worldview has no room for God or other supernatural entities. I claim not that all scientists must be atheists or that science has proved that God does not exist. (I think it has disproved some notions of the concept and the theology accompanying these.) Scientific explanations, however, are void of supernatural entities: they explain the world naturalistically. At best, God is left as a spiritual possibility but one that is not allowed to enter into or influence scientific explanations of how the world works.

Most religious worldviews on the other hand are based on, or at least include, a contrasting notion, namely that God or some other supernatural entity or force not only exists in a sphere excluded from this world but is active in the world, having the ability to affect matter and matters. Accordingly the supernatural at least potentially has a role in religious explanations of how the world works.

The result of these opposing views is what David Gary Shaw in *History and Theory*'s recent theme issue on Religion and History called the "deep ontological dissonance" that is created "when historians disagree with their subjects as to the possibilities of supernatural beings or supernatural actions."² The problem is not limited to historians or historians of religion; rather, as Shaw observes, it is "the classical anthropological problem: confronting the seriously other and trying to find the best way to learn from that encounter."³

I am aware of 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.⁴ They appear mutually exclusive. Does this mean that not only science but also social science and the empirical humanities—including history and the study of religion—are unable to speak to believers in an idiom they accept? And vice versa: is the implication that believers cannot convey their experiences to (social) scientists in a way acceptable to the latter? Is there an unbridgeable gap of communication? I think yes. This essay is an attempt to show why.

II. A MIRACLE ON FOX LAKES

In 1652 God reportedly saved two brothers from starvation. The two, Anders and Ola Engebretsen, had been fishing for some days in some lakes called *Revsjøene* [the Fox Lakes] in *Gudbrandsdalen*. On the morning of August 6, they rose early, left their cabin, and went out in their boat to take in their fishing nets. They left

2. David Gary Shaw, "Modernity between Us and Them: The Place of Religion within History," *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 45 (2006), 1-9, quotation from 3.

3. *Ibid.*, 7.

4. For such definitions, see Jon Butler, "Theory and God in Gotham," *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 45 (2006), 47-61, esp. 52; and Rodney Stark, "Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic, and Science," *Review of Religious Research* 43 (2001), 101-120, esp. 108-111.

their outer garments by the shore so they would be able to work more freely. They rowed over to an islet called *Studenten* [the Student], where they had put out their nets the previous day, and went ashore.

Suddenly a gust of wind took their boat and left the brothers stranded on the tiny island, the area of which was less than ten by twenty meters. The distance to the shore was only 150 meters and the water was not very deep. That was of little comfort, however, since it was too deep to wade and neither of the two could swim. They could hope that a hunter or fisherman might accidentally come by and save them, but chances were small. Their only additional hope was God, “who by no ordinary means and contrary to all expectancy can help his own.”⁵ So they prayed fervently.

They had few clothes, the wind was blowing, and the first night was freezing cold, so on the second day, the brothers gathered stones to build a small, rectangular, roof-less shack to get shelter from the wind. They had another reason for doing this as well: the stone walls might stop their dead bodies from being taken by the waves that washed over the islet in the fall. The prospect of their corpses being left to decay in the wilderness—the devil’s domain—was an ugly one. If the shack could function as a temporary tomb there was hope eventually their bodies would be found and receive a Christian burial.

The cold and the wind was only the first problem. Worse in the long run—which would not be very long unless their luck turned—was the hunger they soon felt. Eventually they found a kind of edible plant known as *viola canina*. Rations were very small: no matter how thoroughly they searched, they never found more than one spoonful for each brother every morning and every evening. Stranger still: even in places where they had picked every blade the night before, and had carried the remaining soil inside their shack to make a floor, they would find fresh plants the next morning. They ate it, praised God, and sang hymns to the Lord who thus provided for them—albeit meagerly.

On the twelfth day the youngest brother, Anders, who by the way had studied (theology of course) in Copenhagen, was so exhausted he could no longer walk but could only crawl around on his knees. His older brother was even more worn out, and when that night they found no edible plants, they understood this was the end. They made their wills, and used their knives to write on some wooden sticks what had happened to them. For a funeral homily they chose a text from Psalms, and crept into their shack to die.

But death did not come. Instead there came a search team from the village, alarmed by the lonely return of the brothers’ dog. The dog had accompanied Ola and Anders on their fishing trip but had stayed on land when they went out in the boat. For eight days it had waited, and had wisely—and fortunately for its masters—resisted their attempts to lure it over to the island (where they had planned to eat it). Instead it had finally run the forty kilometers back to the village, where its peculiar behavior made people suspect something was wrong with the brothers. One neighbor went looking for the two, found their outer garments by the shore, decided they must have drowned, and went home.

5. Quoted in Finn Erhard Johannessen, *To vann og ett under: Revsjøenes historie* [Two lakes and a wonder: The history of the Fox Lakes] (Lillehammer, no publisher, 1988), 16, my translation.

Two days later more neighbors went to search for the brothers, perhaps to find them in the lake. On the night before the thirteenth day, they came to the lake, and when the brothers heard men and horses, they managed to shout so the rescue mission noticed their cries and saved them. It was in the nick of time: for eight days Ola was suspended between life and death. Both he and his younger brother survived, however, and in 1691, almost forty years later, Anders (the former student) wrote down the story of their being saved by the grace of God.

Finn Erhard Johannessen, who has written the local history of the Fox Lakes on which I have based my rendering of the story, has established that Anders Engebretsen probably wrote at least two slightly different versions of the dramatic event. Although lost, the two versions found their way into books written by local priests in, respectively, 1732 and 1743. Johannessen notes that “the story is told in a very reliable way” but dismisses the report of “the grass that came up in small portions every day, also where it had been plucked bare the day before,” stating that “it can hardly have happened.”⁶ He goes on to explain away the miracle as the result of the Engebretsen brothers being so weakened that they had lost track of where they had found the plants the day before, and suggests that Anders had modeled his report of the miracle on the Bible’s miracle stories of the Israelites in the desert who were fed with manna from heaven (Exodus 16), and the widow in Zarephath whose bin of flour was not used up and whose jar of oil was not dry (1 Kings 17:8-16).

Interestingly, Johannessen is no atheist; he may well say his evening prayer. The idea of God’s hand (or in this case, his little finger) should not be anathema to him. Still he rejects out of hand the possibility of a miracle so puny that even the theologian Erik Pontoppidan, who included the story in his *Natural History of Norway* published in 1752–1753, found its most remarkable feature its economy.⁷ Why is God’s providence written off by Johannessen in his discussion of the Fox Lakes incident when in another capacity he believes in His existence?⁸ More generally, why are historians unable to accept God as agent?

The answer to this question contains the crux of the issue I raise in this essay, namely the reconciliation of scientific and religious worldviews. Before presenting my answer, however, I must resist no less than four temptations to take the easy way out of what I insist is a real dilemma, and where consequently what may look like easy ways out are dead-end streets.

III. FOUR TEMPTATIONS

Temptation #1: Explaining Evidence Not Events

The first temptation may seem a technicality but has a real presence. Normally when we speak of explanations we think of an explanandum *event*: some incident or process that is to be explained, causally or otherwise. Philosophically inclined historians would perhaps specify that the explanandum is an event *under a description*, to ensure that we do not create a multitude of seemingly contradictory

6. *Ibid.*, 30-31, my translation.

7. *Ibid.*, 23.

8. Personal communication from Johannessen.

explanations that in fact are compatible because they explain different features or descriptions of the same phenomenon. To ensure that all explain the same thing (that is, the event under one and the same description) it is often wise to keep the description of the explanandum clinical: as neutral as possible, as I have attempted in my description of the Engebretsen brothers' ordeal at the Fox Lakes.

The alternative to the explanandum-event perspective is the view that historians really explain not events but *evidence*: remains that carry information of a purported incident or process in the past.⁹ In my example of the Engebretsen brothers, the explanandum would then be not what happened on the islet—that would be the event—but the evidence left behind in the form of the priests' versions of Anders's story. (Since his reports are lost they are no longer available as evidence.)

This distinction between explanandum events and evidence could be of major importance, since if we are to explain the evidence—the reports in the books by the local priests—it seems we can escape the question of what really happened on the islet. It would be sufficient to note that both the Engebretsen brothers and Anders's clerical ghostwriters lived in a cultural climate in which the notion of God's providence was commonplace and would seem the natural way to explain the daily provision of edible plants. We could trace the evolution of this cultural climate; we might even speculate that the Norwegian priests were aware of the fierce debate on miracles that was raging in Britain at the time and suggest that they saw their rendering of the *viola canina* miracle as their contribution. This idea is less far-fetched than it might seem, since according to R. M. Burns the "Great Debate on Miracles" had "at its height—around the 1720s— . . . received enormous attention; so much that almost every English theologian, philosopher, or even simply man of letters of the period made some contribution to it."¹⁰ There would be no need for us, however, to enter into speculation as to *wie es eigentlich gewesen* that the brothers found the plants.

This is tempting but succeeds only to a point. It is of no use when scholars are interested in what really happens or happened—how the world works—and not just in what actors think happens or thought happened. Put differently: we might take an interest in the event of which the evidence reports, whether current acts of miraculous healing or historical incidents such as the angelic communication of the Book of Mormon to Joseph Smith, Jr., in the late 1820s, or the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The accuracy of such evidence matters. To the degree that we want to explain the event, we are back at the problem of providing an explanation that is acceptable to the religious actors as well as to the scholarly community. We cannot take the easy way out.

Temptation #2: Sophistry on Hume and Miracles

The great debate on miracles in Britain was capped by the publication in 1748 of David Hume's essay "Of Miracles." Here Hume argues against the possibility of miracles, which he defines as "a violation of the laws of nature."¹¹ The exact

9. Aviezer Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past: A Philosophy of Historiography* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 185-191.

10. R. M. Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles: From Joseph Glanvill to David Hume* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1981), 10.

11. David Hume, "Of Miracles" [1748], Appendix 2 in Robert J. Fogelin, *A Defense of Hume on*

nature of Hume's argument is still debated, especially whether he intends to provide, in the first part of his essay, an *a priori* argument against miracles, or mainly intends this part to show the extreme evidential difficulty of asserting miracle claims.¹² There is little disagreement that in the second part his intention is to demolish the credibility of testimony about specifically *religious* miracles: violations of laws of nature—by God or some other supernatural being—that serve as a foundation for religion. Fortunately for our purpose it suffices to be aware of the debate and of the eventual influence of Hume's essay.

Aviezer Tucker has faulted Hume for being ahistorical, since neither the ancient Hebrews who introduced the concept of miracles nor the Greeks who provided the other main source of Christianity entertained the idea that nature was governed by inviolable laws. He also states that, strictly speaking, none of the main forms of biblical miracles constitute absolute violations of the laws of nature. Resurrections of the dead, transmutations of essential fluids, curing of sicknesses (including prolonged infertility), and military victories—all by divine intervention—and prophecy only violate laws of nature relative to specified initial conditions, and such conditions are not specified in the Bible.¹³

Again we can avoid going into the essence of this debate. The concept "miracle" is not used in the stories of the Engebretsen brothers' narrow escape from death on the Student islet, and no-one has argued that the provision of fresh plants on ground that had been barren the day before constituted a violation of the laws of nature. Tucker's sophistry is beside the point, which can be put as follows. First, there is no reason to doubt that the Engebretsen brothers and their contemporaries believed Providence had acted to save the two from what otherwise would have been a certain loss of life. Second, there is nothing in Anders's description that enables us to give a convincing naturalistic explanation of the daily provision of fresh—if admittedly meager—*viola canina* on barren ground. That we need not imagine God breaking any laws of nature to see his active hand in catering to the lost brothers only makes it clearer that we are facing a real dilemma: either we accept the religious explanation provided by Anders and his clerical ghostwriters, or we substitute a secular explanation that accounts for the same events without invoking God. While the latter path is fairly easy—which again serves my methodological purpose—it is immensely more challenging to provide a naturalistic, that is, scientifically acceptable, explanation of the events that would also be acceptable to Anders and his brother.

Temptation #3: Becoming Resigned to the Epistemological Gap

The event I have taken as my point of departure happened more than 350 years ago. The central actors probably believed the earth was the center of the universe; Newton had yet to develop his physics. With Foucault we could speak of an epistemic shift—or several—since the days of the Engebretsen brothers' ordeal on the

Miracles (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 68-87, quotation from 72; cf. John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument against Miracles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.

12. Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles*; Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure*; Fogelin, *A Defense of Hume on Miracles*.

13. Aviezer Tucker, "Miracles, Historical Testimonies, and Probabilities," *History and Theory* 44 (2005), 373-390.

Fox Lakes. To put it simply and in an un-Foucauldian way, today we know a lot more about how the world works than did Anders and Ola Engebretsen. Though their clerical ghostwriters—and to a lesser degree Anders—were educated men, the progress of science has given us immensely more knowledge than they had about the workings of the world. It is even a question whether a meaningful conversation on ontology would be possible between them and us, so wide and deep is the knowledge gap. In one respect this gorge renders meaningless the ambition to provide an explanation that would be acceptable across this 350-year epistemological divide.

But concluding that the epistemological gap is too wide to cross is just another apparently easy way out, and I am not looking for escapes. The problem I am discussing is whether we can provide mutually acceptable explanations, on the admittedly hypothetical and in many instances even counterfactual premise that the epistemological gap is not so wide that it cannot be bridged to the degree that meaningful conversation is made possible. The epistemological distance between the Engebretsen brothers and us is much greater than the 150 meters from the Student islet to the shore. And yet we must imagine them walking on the water to cross over to current epistemological shores. (The suggestion that we come to them is temptation #4.)

One reason that we should not leave the brothers stranded on their epistemological seventeenth-century islet is that the situation described—someone claiming God acted to save them or, more generally, influence matters—is not at all restricted to historical actors in long-gone periods. In the West today events are often explained by reference to the active presence of God or other supernatural forces. According to a Gallup poll, in 1989 four in five Americans agreed with the proposition that “even today, miracles are still performed by the power of God.”¹⁴ President George W. Bush reportedly sought God’s advice before striking back on terrorism. Norwegian Princess Märtha Louise, who is trained as a physiotherapist and has made a career as a storyteller, in 2007 claimed she could communicate with angels and had healing powers.¹⁵ A course in which students, for 3,000 euros a year for three years, would learn reading, healing, and touching from the princess and her associate was fully subscribed after only two days of media reporting.¹⁶

Presidents and princesses aside, highly educated people pray in earnest. Forty percent of top U.S. scientists “believe in a God to whom one may pray in the expectation of receiving an answer,” meaning “more than the subjective, psychological effect of prayer.”¹⁷ Here there is no epistemological time gap: not only

14. Brad S. Gregory, “The Other Confessional History: On Secular Bias in the Study of Religion,” *History and Theory*, *Theme Issue* 45 (2006), 132-149, quotation from 138, footnote 12.

15. Front-page articles in the newspapers *Aftenposten* and *Dagbladet* (July 25, 2007).

16. In mid September 2007 the course had a weekend gathering during which “we seek contact with angels and learn how we can attempt to create heavenly miracles in our own existence.” This quotation is from the course’s website, <http://www.astarte-education.com/>, accessed August 2, 2007 (my translation). Originally the website had stated with no qualifications that contact with angels would be established and miracles made, but the text was watered down after a high-profile journal editor and finance mogul accused the princess of fraud. “Misleading advertising” that promises gains that cannot be achieved is illegal in Norway. See *Aftenposten* (August 2, 2007).

17. Rodney Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.—Rest in Peace,” *Sociology of Religion* 60 (1999), 249-273, esp. 265.

Galileo and Newton (a devout Christian) but also Einstein and Bohr and so on—even Darwin—are part of the common knowledge ground for both believers and atheists. We can converse meaningfully with Mormons or Baptists. But can we provide mutually acceptable explanations of how the world works in instances where believers claim God has acted to influence events?

Temptation #4: Asking What It Meant to Them

Brad Gregory in a recent work recommends that historians who study religious actors have as their “guiding question” the simple “What did it mean to them?” This will help historians “to ‘get’ religion on the terms of religious people,” which is achieved when the actors would “recognize themselves in what we say about them.”¹⁸ While tempting, on closer scrutiny this route leads nowhere.

Gregory’s guiding question is a variation of what historians have been doing since Ranke, namely to ask how their actors construed the situation. Anthropologists excel in this task. This is but a first step in the historian’s (or anthropologist’s) research, however, for we cannot rest content with merely retelling or repackaging the conceptions of our study objects. Our job is not only to understand and explicate what actors thought but to explain why they thought so. In this task there is no escaping our own ontology. We cannot satisfy ourselves with explicating that believers in the seventeenth century thought a certain woman was possessed by the devil—or that some people have such notions today. In the winter of 2007 pastor Leif Sommerseth of the Norwegian Lutheran State Church was called to exorcise an evil spirit from a kindergarten in Lakselv, in northern Norway. After eliminating the possibility that the problem was due to psychological factors, the pastor was able to locate the spirit in a small part of the area of the kindergarten.¹⁹ Asking what this meant to the pastor is perhaps necessary but surely insufficient and unsatisfactory. We must explain the events, and this often entails, as Gregory admits, judging the truth value of the beliefs of our study objects.²⁰

There is another, fundamental, reason that Gregory’s empathetic approach is no solution to our dilemma of reconciliation between science and religion. The reason is hermeneutical. R. G. Collingwood has argued forcefully that the whole idea of asking “what did it mean to them” by bracketing one’s own worldview and values—in Gregory’s words, “not to impose *any* metaphysical beliefs or moral judgments on religious people”—is mistaken.²¹ The historian, according to Collingwood, “not only re-enacts past thought, he re-enacts it in the context of his own knowledge and therefore, in re-enacting it, criticizes it, forms his own judgment of its value, corrects whatever errors he can discern in it.” Such criticism, moreover, is an integral part of re-enactment:

The criticism of the thought whose history he traces is not something secondary to tracing the history of it. It is an indispensable condition of the historical knowledge itself. Nothing could be a completer error concerning the history of thought than to suppose that the historian as such merely ascertains “what so-and-so thought,” leaving it to some one else to

18. Gregory, “The Other Confessional History,” 146, 148.

19. Reported in *Aftenposten* (March 1, 2007), 6.

20. Gregory, “The Other Confessional History,” 147, footnote 36.

21. *Ibid.*, 146-147, italics in original.

decide “whether it was true.” All thinking is critical thinking; the thought which re-enacts past thoughts, therefore, criticizes them in re-enacting them.²²

Although I reserve judgment on Collingwood’s assertions, his remarks point to the basic question of what is the purpose of attempts at historical re-enactment or understanding the thoughts of religious actors. We do not study past (or contemporary) religious actors for the sake of the past or the actors themselves; we study history or religion for our own sake. The fundamental question is not “what did it mean to them?” but “what does it mean for us?” What it meant to them is just a step on the road to what is in it for us, and at some point along this road our own ontology must substitute for the ontology of our study objects which, after all, has only historical (or anthropological) interest in a limited sense.

IV. THE BEST EXPLANATION OF THE FOX LAKES MIRACLE

Having resisted the temptation to seek easy ways out of the dilemma of reconciling science and religion, it is time to return to the puny Fox Lakes miracle. Why does the historian Johannessen, a believer in God, dismiss the actors’ religious explanation of the event?

Philosophers seem to converge on the view that historians choose or at least justify singular descriptions of past events (or evidence of these events) by a form of inference known as arguments to the best explanation. This is a method for choosing one among two or more incompatible hypotheses from which can be inferred statements describing available evidence. The critical question is which explanatory hypothesis to prefer, or rather which criteria to employ in order to select the hypothesis that best explains the evidence (and, at one remove, the event about which the evidence reports).

The exact enumeration and formulation of the criteria for arguments to the best explanation are matters of philosophical debate. There seems to be agreement, however, on the main points.²³ One is *scope*: the greater variety of data or evidence that is implied by the explanatory hypothesis, the better. A second criterion is *power*: the more probable the hypothesis renders the data, the better. If the hypothesis is that God acted to save the Engebretsen brothers, this renders the existence of the reports of the miracle more probable than the alternative hypothesis that Anders made up the story. *Simplicity* is another agreed-upon criterion, meaning that the fewer ad hoc suppositions a hypothesis includes, the more reason there is to prefer it over more ad hoc alternatives.

The final and perhaps most important—and definitely most problematic—criterion is *plausibility*. This has both a positive aspect—the degree to which accepted beliefs (or “truths”) imply the hypothesis—and a negative aspect: the degree to which the hypothesis is disconfirmed by existing accepted beliefs. Norway’s grand old man of philosophy of history, Ottar Dahl, puts it thus in the methodology textbook that was used by students at the University of Oslo for forty

22. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946), 215.

23. C. Behan McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Description* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 19–20; Peter Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004).

years after its appearance in 1964: “the decisive justification criterion is whether a hypothesis *fits* ‘what else we know,’ i.e. the totality of our theories.”²⁴ People’s evaluation of plausibility and knowledge-fit, however, varies with their ontology. Who are Dahl’s “we” that “know” things? Believers and atheists have different ideas of which beliefs are accepted—by whom?—or “reasonable”²⁵ about the set-up of the world. By glossing over or ignoring this difference, which amounts to a divide with respect to the existence of an active God, philosophers make things too easy. When it comes to God, there is no consensus on “what else we know” or on what are accepted or reasonable beliefs, let alone truths.

Johannessen, perhaps unaware of the formalities of inference to the best explanation but surely cognizant of Dahl’s methodological advice, observes that the Fox Lakes story “contains nothing that is contrary to usual notions of how the world works *when we except the little grass miracle*.”²⁶ This, as we have seen, he thinks “can hardly have happened.” Why not?

My take is that Johannessen rejects the miracle hypothesis because as a historian—that is, *when doing historical research* (including writing)—he sees himself as part of what Margaret Gilbert terms a “plural subject” that is constituted by the scientific community.²⁷ Thus he is part of a “we” whose ontology is provided by, or at a minimum must conform to, the findings of nuclear physicists, chemists, evolutionary biologists, and others. Their explanations of how the world works have no room for supernatural beings: the scientific quest is *natural* science. “The physical world,” claims Nobel Laureate in medicine Gerald Edelman, “is causally closed to anything but the interactions of matter-energy.”²⁸ As Jaegwon Kim puts it, “the totality of physical particulars ‘exhausts’ . . . all of concrete existents.”²⁹ Natural scientists as well as social scientists may believe in God—but not *qua* scientists. The plural subject of science—“we scientists”—are atheists.

To scientists *qua* scientists—natural and social alike—the plausibility criterion of arguments to the best explanation should therefore be understood to relate to the degree to which accepted *scientific* beliefs (truths) imply or disconfirm the hypothesis. This is fatal to the miracle hypothesis in the Fox Lakes story, since no accepted scientific truths imply provision miracles and it can well be argued that quite a few scientific truths disconfirm them, irrespective of whether the miracles in question entail a violation of the laws of nature.

24. Ottar Dahl, *Grunntrekk i historieforskningens metodelære* [Main lines in the methodology of historical research], 2nd edition [1st edition 1964] (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1976), 100, cf. 79 and 111, italics in original, my translation.

25. C. Behan McCullagh, *The Logic of History: Putting Postmodernism in Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2004), 52.

26. Johannessen, *To vann og et under*, 30, translation and italics mine.

27. Margaret Gilbert, *On Social Facts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 163-164, 199-214.

28. Gerald M. Edelman, “The Embodiment of Mind,” *Daedalus* 135 (2006), 23-32, quotation from 30-31.

29. Jaegwon Kim, “‘Downward Causation’ in Emergence and Non-Reductive Physicalism,” in *Emergence or Reduction? Essays on the Prospects of Nonreductive Physicalism*, ed. Ansgar Beckermann, Hans Flohr, and Jaegwon Kim (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), 119-138, quotation from 128-129.

To be accepted as science—to be part of the scientific community—even theology must conform to scientific atheism. This means, of course, not that theologians must be atheists, only that when doing theological research they do not have recourse to the idea of a God that takes an active part in the world. Admittedly this amounts to a somewhat anemic theology, which is exactly the criticism leveled at university theologians from lay colleagues. Indeed, theologians have only reluctantly accepted the exclusion of the supernatural from their explanatory tool box *qua* scientists.³⁰ The alternative, however, is the exclusion of theology from the scientific community.

V. METAPHYSICAL NATURALISM AS SECULAR CONFSSIONAL HISTORY?

Believers and radical postmodernists sometimes attack what they consider unwarranted claims to a privileged epistemic position on behalf of science. This position is exemplified by Gregory's assertion that the "metaphysical naturalism" of current science is parallel to and a functional equivalent of confessional religion, since it is based on assumptions that are "undemonstrable," namely the non-existence of the supernatural. He thinks that "to adopt a theory or theoretical hybrid purporting to explain religion in terms dictated by metaphysical naturalism is to work in a manner analogous to that of a traditional, religious confessional historian, insofar as one's analysis relies substantively on one's own beliefs."³¹ Not only an unashamed and self-declared social *scientist* such as Emile Durkheim but also cultural-relativist doyens Clifford Geertz and Michel Foucault are seen as having built their analyses of religion "ultimately on a dogmatic metaphysical naturalism, or on its functional equivalent, a thoroughgoing skepticism about all religious claims—that *no* religion is, indeed *cannot be*, what its believer-practitioners claim that it is."³² In Gregory's opinion, "to assume metaphysical naturalism in order to analyze religion's cultural expressions and meanings . . . precludes understanding those meanings on practitioners' terms."³³

I think Gregory misrepresents science and misunderstands social scientists. First, metaphysical naturalism is not a dogma but an admittedly basic working hypothesis of modern science. Naturalism has attained this position because modern science is an empirical quest, and the realm of the supernatural has so far been inaccessible empirically. Science refuses to include the supernatural in its description of the world because claims about the existence of the supernatural have been impossible to support, or even evaluate, empirically.³⁴ Hence the naturalistic assumption of science, which is a whole different matter from the unempirical and unscientific—though not necessarily false—beliefs of religious people about God, salvation, the afterlife, and so on.

30. For an example of theologians' resistance to let go of God in their explanatory vocabulary, as well as of historians' insistence that he should be excluded, see Jens Arup Seip, "Kirkelig historieteorie og kirkelig historieforskning," [Confessional theory of history and confessional historiography] *Historisk Tidsskrift* 33 (1944), 372-398.

31. Gregory, "The Other Confessional History," 137, 138.

32. *Ibid.*, 136-137, italics in original.

33. *Ibid.*, 144.

34. Stark, "Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic, and Science."

Second, Gregory seems not to have grasped the consequences for social science of the unempirical foundation of religious beliefs, which has led to their exclusion from the scientific realm. He quotes Richard White's comment "I am a historian. I don't believe in transcendence," and observes that "the assumptions behind such remarks are theologically atheistic, metaphysically materialist, and culturally relativist, framed by the postulates of the natural sciences."³⁵ *Qua* historian White does not have much choice, however, but to renounce belief in transcendence. If we amend his comment to "When I am a historian, I don't believe in transcendence," the point becomes clear. When discussing Geertz, Gregory gets close to the gist of this matter. In a footnote he quotes Geertz's references to "the business of the scientist" and "the self-imposed limitations of the scientific perspective" that bar him from considering the questions of, respectively, divine intervention and the truth value of religious claims.³⁶ With Collingwood I think Geertz cannot escape taking a stand on such matters although he need not "pronounce upon" them,³⁷ but that is not what is at issue here. Gregory fails to see the implication of these remarks, namely the admittance that *qua* anthropologist (or any other empirical scientist), one cannot believe in transcendence or divine intervention and so on, since such claims lack empirical substance and cannot be tested scientifically. Personally one may believe in God or even miracles—lots of scientists do—but not as a historian or social scientist.

VI. CONCLUSION: LIVING WITH AN UNBRIDGEABLE GAP

If my analysis of science as a plural subject based on the working hypothesis of metaphysical naturalism is correct, the gap between, on the one hand, researchers belonging to this atheistic community and, on the other hand, believers in supernatural beings that take an active part in the world, seems impossible to bridge. Contrary to Gregory's assertion, there is no "third way,"³⁸ because scientific descriptions of the world exclude the realm of the supernatural, on which religious worldviews are based. This means that religious descriptions *ipso facto* are unscientific.

Being unscientific is not equivalent to being false. Perhaps the awareness of this is what explains why so many scientists are religious, that is, they believe in supernatural beings with powers to influence events in the material world. The explanation can hardly be that scientists are schizophrenics but rather that people have great capacity for what we might call multiple *partaking*: being part of several plural subjects at the same time, as well as being a private subject, without feeling torn to pieces even when the different subjects oppose each other.

University of Oslo

35. Gregory, "The Other Confessional History," 136.

36. *Ibid.*, 142, footnote 25.

37. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *idem*, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 87-125, quotation from 112.

38. Gregory, "The Other Confessional History," 146.