Religious Belief and the Diversity Problem for Rationality: A Cognitive Science Approach

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the diversity problem for the rationality of religious belief. By taking Plantinga's reformed epistemology as a starting point, I discuss how issues with his theory of epistemic warrant for religious belief serve to highlight that the diversity problem is a significant concern in the sphere of the epistemology of religious belief. The diversity problem relates to the plurality of religious beliefs worldwide: why this plurality might be seen to undermine warrant, and why it emphasises a need for an account that suitably explains why such diversity can be found. I provide a solution for the diversity problem by utilising recent findings in the cognitive science of religion, showing how they can account for the diversity of religious beliefs around the world, and provide a robust explanation of how these beliefs are formed. I also argue that the cognitive science of religion need not be seen as undermining the rationality of religious belief, but rather can be compatible with the thesis that religious beliefs are epistemically justified for the believer, regardless of their particular faith.

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Introduction

The debate surrounding the rationality of religious beliefs is one that has long been at the forefront of the philosophy of religion, and still remains a field of great debate today. Alongside scientific advances that seem to explain away the need for religion at all, many have argued that those who hold religious beliefs are somehow unjustified and irrational in the holding of those beliefs. Coupled with the fact that there are many extremely varied religions and faiths worldwide, it seems that many problems face those who wish to argue for the rationality of religious beliefs.

My starting point here is to consider the work of one of the most renowned philosophers of religion, Alvin Plantinga. His reformed epistemology and arguments for the epistemic warrant of religious belief have been heavily influential throughout the 21st century and as such are vitally important to any considerations of the rationality of religious beliefs. My purpose is to explore Plantinga's theories in relation to advances in the cognitive science of religion (hereafter CSR), aiming to reconcile the two as opposed to claiming that the CSR renders religious beliefs irrational and unjustified. The CSR is relevant to the discussion of religious beliefs as it offers an account of religious belief formation and transmission that can provide a solution to the diversity problem. The diversity problem for the rationality of religious beliefs concerns the issues surrounding the fact that there are many different faiths worldwide, raising questions about whether none or all of the different religions are justified, how we might have confidence in our religious belief forming faculties given their varied output, and why it is that religious beliefs are so prevalent.

In Chapter 1, I outline the background to Plantinga's theories, moving on to discuss some flaws with his theory of epistemic warrant. From these issues, I explain why the diversity problem for religious belief arises, characterising it as a twofold issue that has repercussions for the conditions that any good theory of justification of religious beliefs will have to meet.

In chapter 2, I move on to considering the recent advances in the field of the cognitive science of religion, and the bearing that these have on the debate. With specific reference to the research of Pascal Boyer and Daniel Sperber, I show how the cognitive science of religion offers an account of why it is that we see so much diversity of religious traditions worldwide, and how it is that these beliefs are formed in the human mind. From this, I argue that the cognitive science explanation, if empirically correct, can offer a solution to the diversity problem for religious belief.

Chapter 3 deals with the question of whether the cognitive science explanation for religious belief formation is compatible with the thesis that religious beliefs are rationally held by those who subscribe to them. Utilising Plantinga's proper basicality of religious belief, I contend that the CSR can exist in harmony with the epistemic justification of religious belief. Further, following the CSR distinction between intuitive and reflective understandings, I argue that reflective beliefs (that are specific to the faith you adhere to) can be seen to be justified via testimony from religious authority. As such, I show that the CSR is compatible with the rationality of religious belief.

Chapter 4 functions as a platform to reply to three objections that I see as being the major obstacles for my thesis to overcome. I consider the contention that the CSR should really be seen as undermining any sort of justification which religious beliefs might have. Additionally I discuss objections normally applied to Plantinga's proper basicality of beliefs

thesis, as by utilising his theory my thesis will also be subject to these problems. Lastly I deal with the objection that relying on testimony will render the aforementioned reflective beliefs epistemically suspect.

Chapter 1: Warranted Christian Belief?

This chapter outlines Plantinga's reformed epistemology, contained in his seminal work *Warranted Christian Belief*. His models for warranted theistic and specifically Christian beliefs are of the utmost importance, as is his strict definition of epistemic warrant. Discussion of these theories will lead us to the question of what it means for a cognitive faculty involved in belief formation to be functioning properly, and why by Plantinga's own definition of warrant and proper function, the diversity of religious beliefs amongst humans poses a problem for his theory of warrant. The concerns raised by the diversity of religious beliefs are not just issues exclusive to Plantinga's work, but are a point of contention for theories of epistemic justification of religious beliefs at large. This leads me to classifying the diversity problem as a twofold matter that results in important implications on the expectations of any good theory of epistemic justification for religious beliefs.

1.1. Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology

Plantinga has two models intended to establish the warrant of religious beliefs: (i) the Aquinas/Calvin (A/C) model is used to show the warrant of theistic belief, i.e. that belief in a God is warranted; and, (ii) the extended A/C model is proposed to confirm the warrant of more specific Christian beliefs, such as those regarding the birth, death and resurrection of Christ. The A/C and extended A/C models, as their names would suggest, are heavily influenced by the works of Saint Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, which is particularly evident in Plantinga's revitalisation of their notion of the *sensus divinitatis*, or sense of the divine, that exists within all of us and results in our belief in God. Plantinga characterises the *sensus divinitatis* as a natural cognitive function that produces theistic belief, working in the same manner as a functional input-output device, and with its actions defined as:

> A disposition or set of dispositions to form theistic beliefs in various circumstances, in response to the sorts of conditions or stimuli that trigger the working of this sense of divinity.[1]

The type of input that might constitute the conditions or stimuli that can cause the sense of the divine to produce a belief in God can include things like the beauty of the external world. Plantinga gives examples of these sorts of stimuli, stating that perceptual inputs like the dispersal of light through the leaves of a tree, or a view of magnificent snow-capped mountains in the distance can awaken the *sensus divinitatis*.[2]

So we see that the *sensus divinitatis* is producing beliefs that are not related to any specific philosophical argument for God's existence: rather, Plantinga claims that the sense of the divine is acting in the same sort of way as the cognitive functions that produce regular perceptual beliefs, memories, and *a priori* beliefs.[3] On an everyday basis we take it to be rational to trust our senses, even when we are not able to provide a specific proof for doing so. For example, I take it be rational to trust that I am sitting in the kitchen, typing, based on my current experience as of doing so. I don't base this belief on a demonstrative proof, rather on the immediate perception as of being in this position. According to Plantinga, the *sensus divinitatis* operates in a similar way to the senses that lead me to believe I am sitting and typing. The belief that God exists that arises from the *sensus divinitatis* is an immediate perception much like the belief that I am in existence. I have the same reasonable degree of justification for believing in both the external world and that God exists. These sorts of beliefs can be seen to be properly basic, in that they do not require any evidentiary justification. I return in detail to the notion of proper basicality of belief in chapter 3.

[1] Plantinga, Alvin (2000, 173 – 174). *Warranted Christian Belief.* OUP.
[2] Plantinga, Alvin (2000, 174).
[3] Ibid.

The sense of the divine is integral to the A/C model as it is the cognitive faculty through which belief in a God can be reached. Although Plantinga's claim is that everyone has a natural *sensus divinitatis*, he contends that not everybody is actively producing an output of Christian belief because humanity as a whole has fallen into sin. Thus, humans require salvation in order for the sense of the divine to be healed, and so to allow for belief in a God to be formed. Plantinga believes there are two consequences of humanity's fall into sin. The first is the cognitive consequence of original sin, which is the claim that the *sensus divinitatis* has been damaged, and we cannot come to know God until it has been repaired. Secondly, there is the affective consequence of sin, that our affections have been skewed and "our hearts harbour deep and radical evil", resulting in a greater love for ourselves that for God.[4]

In order for humanity to move past the consequences of sin, Plantinga claims the remedy is the life, death and resurrection of Christ. This resulted in the presence of the Holy Spirit amongst us, allowing it to heal the broken *sensus divinitatis*. This is described as a "three-tiered cognitive process" that was instigated by God himself to allow for salvation. Firstly God spoke to human kind through the authoring of Scripture via the prophets, and as such the oral tradition became written tradition. [5] Secondly, the birth, death and resurrection of Christ allowed for the Holy Spirit's presence on earth. Lastly, the Holy Spirit's presence on earth allowed it to help to repair the *sensus divinitatis* and so to instil theistic beliefs. This third part, he names the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit (IIHS), which involves the Holy Spirit granting us the gift of faith after we invite it inside of us by engaging with scripture and sermon. Hence, the A/C model extends to include only Christian beliefs by

[4] Plantinga, Alvin (2000, 205).
[5] Plantinga, Alvin (2000, 243).

utilising this explanation of the cure for the consequences of sin, aiming to prove warrant can be reached for both theistic beliefs and attendant Christian beliefs.[6]

1.2. Warrant and the Diversity Problem

Before considering the issues with Plantinga's theory of warrant that highlight the diversity problem, first I must explain what exactly the diversity problem consists of. In WCB, Plantinga does consider the plurality of religious beliefs as a defeater for his theory, but his discussion misses out some important implications of the diversity problem. Firstly, he addresses the diversity of religious beliefs as a defeater on the basis of probability. This type of diversity problem states that the combined probability of other religions being true outweighs the probability of Christianity being true, so the Christian should abandon their beliefs based solely on diversity.[7] The second type of diversity problem he considers is the charge that given the diversity of religious beliefs, the believer ought to abandon their beliefs due to the fact that exclusively believing in their particular religion being the rational and correct one is arbitrary.

Here I will not be concerned with these two types of diversity problem. Rather, I will engage with the diversity problem characterised as:

(i) **The Unreliability Problem**: the contention that diversity undermines the reliability of the belief-forming faculties involved in religious belief formation.

(ii) **The Analogy Problem**: the contention that any religious believer can utilise Plantinga's theory to argue analogously for the justification of their particular faith.

(iii) **The Insufficiency Problem**: the contention that Plantinga does not offer a sufficient account of why there is religious diversity at all.

[6] Although beyond the scope of this thesis, it is interesting to note that it can be argued that the A/C and extended A/C models are viciously circular. The A/C model for warrant of theistic belief depends on the doctrine of original sin being warranted, but this doctrine is supposed to be warranted via the extended A/C model. Thus the A/C model presupposes the success of the extended A/C model in proving the warrant of the doctrine of original sin.

[7] Plantinga, Alvin (2000, 421 – 422).

I will return to these three categorisations of the diversity problem after discussing why issues arise for Plantinga's theory of warrant.

If the A/C and extended A/C models are to be successful then Plantinga's theory of epistemic warrant must be without problems. Consequently the theory is arguably the cornerstone of his reformed epistemology. The theory of epistemic warrant is stated as follows:

> [A] belief has warrant for a person S only if that belief is produced in S by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for S's kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth.[8]

For Plantinga then, the theory of warrant is threefold: (i) belief-producing cognitive faculties must be properly functioning; (ii) they must be doing so in an environment that is appropriate; and, (iii) the design plan of this environment must be one that is aimed at producing beliefs that are true. Plantinga reaches this strict definition of warrant by discussing each aspect in turn, explaining that each condition alone will not be sufficient for warrant. In order to have a degree of warrant, the belief in question must satisfy all three of the conditions.

In addition to the three necessary conditions for warrant outlined above, Plantinga also argues that there must be a *reliability constraint* (RC) in order for beliefs to be epistemically warranted. In *Warrant and Proper Function* (WPF), the RC is explained to be the condition that the design plan that governs a belief's production must be such that it is "objectively highly probable" that the belief resultant from the properly functioning cognitive

[8] Plantinga, Alvin (2000, 133).

faculties is true, or "verisimilitudinous."[9] In addition to the three conditions of epistemic warrant, the RC is a necessary factor at play in Plantinga's theory. Hence, the combination of these factors entails I can be confident in the reliability of the proper functioning of my belief-forming cognitive faculties (in that they are not malfunctioning or subject to a form of dysfunction), and I must also be producing beliefs in an environment that pertains to my belief's truth being objectively highly probable. A question arises here in that it is not immediately clear how I might be in a position to be confident that I am in an environment such that the probability of my belief being true is objectively high. It might be that it is sufficient to be in such an environment, but not necessary to know that one is in such an environment. As a result of this, it seems the RC raises some important issues itself. However, there are further problems with Plantinga's theory of warrant that are more vital for the purposes of this thesis, in that they draw attention to the diversity problem.

In a review of Plantinga's WCB, Tyler Wunder points out that by Plantinga's own definition of the proper functioning of the cognitive faculties involved in belief formation, the sensus divinitatis cannot be seen to be operating sufficiently to fulfil the aforementioned criteria, and as such cannot be said to be reliably producing true belief, or properly functioning.[10] Wunder picks up on a particularly important statement that Plantinga makes in his earlier work WPF: regarding the sphere of philosophy, Plantinga claims that "in view of the enormous diversity of competing philosophical views" it should not be asserted that knowledge can be claimed to be established by the philosopher, and that the diversity makes it "unlikely that the relevant segments of the design plan are sufficiently reliable."[11] Furthermore, when speaking in WCB of the field of politics, Plantinga claims that the vast number of varied political beliefs present in the world suggests that those cognitive faculties

[9] Plantinga, Alvin (1993, 17).
[10] Wunder, Tyler (2002). 'Warranted Christian Belief by Alvin Plantinga.' *Philo*. Vol. 5, Issue 1. Spr. – Sum.
[11] Plantinga, Alvin (1993, 19). Cited by Wunder, Tyler (2002).

that are used to form political beliefs are not reliable. He explicitly states that "mistakes and disagreements" amongst experts in a field can mean that any cognitive faculties, and any associated practices, that are involved in the belief-forming process are such that they should not be deemed reliable.[12]

As I have previously argued, given the fact that Plantinga contends that each of us has a *sensus divinitatis* that is capable of processing input such that the output is belief in a God, acting as a stepping stone to the extended A/C model where this process is elaborated to include Christian propositions, it seems due to the fact that there are many world religions, there arises a diversity problem for his theory of warrant.[13] For example, those who hold traditional Christian beliefs have vastly different religious beliefs to spiritual indigenous communities in Africa, where some traditions are non-theistic, and others henotheistic. Furthermore, in addition to the differences between the other major world religions, even within Christianity there is disagreement between different sects of the faith. In light of the widely divergent outputs from the sensus divinitatis, by analogy to Plantinga's discussion of the variety of beliefs in the political and philosophical spheres, it must be the case that the function of the *sensus divinitatis* is unreliable due to the fact that it too produces disagreement among experts and results in enormous diversity of religious belief. As such, it is clear to me that Plantinga's theory of epistemic warrant is problematic, given that his reliance on the reliability and proper functioning of the *sensus divinitatis* is called into question by the diversity of religious belief.

Further still, given that Plantinga's theory is so heavily oriented to his personal Christian beliefs, he does not provide any explanation as to why there are a complex variety of world religions in existence, beyond his claim that the *sensus divinitatis*' function is

[12] Plantinga, Alvin (2000, 148).
[13] Morris, Heather (2012, 5). 'Does Plantinga succeed in his project to prove that Christian beliefs are warranted and epistemically just without evidence?' GU.

impaired by the consequences of original sin. As such the insufficiency problem arises. Plantinga's explanation does not seem to be sufficient to account for the diversity of religions worldwide, as his claim is just that these believers from other faiths are misled by their impaired *sensus divinitatis*: they cannot know God until the IIHS repairs their damaged sense of the divine. However epistemically justified Plantinga himself might be in believing that this is the case, the explanation does not account for why believers from other faiths believe that they know God, or are close to the transcendent, with as much conviction as Plantinga believes that he is in this position.

For example, consider on the one hand a Muslim who has a religious experience as of speaking with Allah, and a Christian who has a religious experience as of speaking with God. For Plantinga, the diversity is explained by the Muslim's impaired *sensus divinitatis* not having yet been healed by the IIHS. Surely though, as per the analogy problem, the Muslim has an equal epistemic standing to the Christian, and as a result of his experience is justified in believing that he has become closer to Allah? Plantinga's account would seem to rule out this sort of justification by claiming that the Muslim's sense of the divine just isn't working correctly. The Muslim is somehow wrong, misled and unjustified in thinking that via their experience they became closer to Allah. On the one hand we see that Plantinga's account is insufficient in that it cannot account for the Muslim's belief, and on the other we see that the analogy problem arises as it seems that the Muslim should be able to justify their experience in the same way as the Christian can justify theirs. For this reason, I think we should seek an explanation of the diversity of religious belief that goes beyond merely stating that believers of other faiths are somehow impaired, and so unjustified. In other words, a good account of religious diversity will not be subject to the analogy and insufficiency problems.

As mentioned, it is not the case that the diversity problem is only an issue for Plantinga's theory of epistemic warrant. It seems to me that the problem is one that all those

who seek to justify religious belief must take into account. The issues that arise with Plantinga's account, and his statements about other fields in which there is disagreement stemming from belief-forming cognitive faculties, serve to emphasise that in the religious sphere, it will be difficult to argue that there is epistemic justification for one particular faith without analogously arguing epistemic justification for another faith. By this I mean that, for instance, if Plantinga's A/C and extended A/C models are valid, and as such the beliefs associated with them are warranted, then why is it the case that a believer from a different faith cannot utilise an analogous argument, albeit with their faith's specific religious beliefs, in order to reason that their beliefs are rational as well? In particular, given the difficultly of independently proving the truth of Plantinga's Christian faith, it seems that if a believer from a non-Christian faith were to argue analogously to him, then they would be in the same epistemic position as he is.

Although some may argue that not every religion can be justified as only one of them may be right, without ample proof to argue that one particular religion is justified, as opposed to the others, it seems that it is epistemically permissible to argue that a religious believer can be epistemically justified regardless of which faith it is that they adhere to. If Plantinga can justify his Christian beliefs through his A/C and extended A/C models, then it seems the Buddhist, or Muslim, or Hindu, may easily justify their beliefs via an analogous argument. Plantinga's theory of warrant highlights that there are two important issues that a solution to the diversity problem must take into account: (i) an exploration of how religious beliefs are formed, and so the reliability of those formation processes; and (ii) an explanation of why it is that religious traditions are diverse. If such an explanation is found, then we can move on to considering the unreliability problem in more detail, answering the question of whether or not believers from different faiths can be justified despite the diversity of their beliefs. I will

return to this question in chapter 3, after first considering the CSR as a solution to the diversity problem in chapter 2.

Chapter 2: The Cognitive Science of Religion

In order to reach a suitable response to the diversity problem, characterised in chapter 1, I believe it is necessary to look beyond the strictly philosophical sphere for answers, as empirical considerations can help to elucidate a good solution. The cognitive science of religion has become increasingly prevalent over recent years, offering a naturalistic approach to the explanation of how religious ideas are formed in the human mind, and how they are transmitted through human societies. Here I discuss Pascal Boyer and Daniel Sperber, two theorists who have been at the forefront of the cognitive science of religion (hereafter CSR will refer specifically to their work). I outline how the combination of their interdisciplinary expertise in anthropology, philosophy and cognitive science, has provided accounts of religious belief formation that explain why humans are prone to hold theistic beliefs and involve themselves in religious practices. I end this chapter by arguing that the cognitive science of religion offers a solution to the diversity problem by presenting an account that clarifies why there are a diverse number of religions worldwide, and by providing details of how these beliefs are produced in the human mind.

2.1. Religious Ideas as Natural

Pascal Boyer is a cultural anthropologist and cognitive scientist, whose work is heavily based in his own anthropological investigations with various tribes and communities, where he has studied in depth their religious beliefs and attendant cultural specificities. In addition to his empirical field studies, Boyer deems it important for anthropological explanations of religious belief to take into account both cognitive science of religion and philosophy of religion, in order to build a cohesive picture of why it is that religious beliefs are inherently popular across humanity. I will, much like Boyer, be using the term *religious*

belief not only to refer to the beliefs of those whose faith lies with the main world religions. I mean to use it in a broader sense, in order to encompass the sort of community member that might not necessarily believe in a particular God or Gods, but rather has a set of spiritual beliefs, or beliefs relating to something transcendent and beyond the material realm of direct perception. In other words, reference to religious belief need not be limited to the beliefs associated with the largest faiths in the world.

In *Why Evolved Cognition Matters to Understanding Cultural Cognitive Variations* Boyer explains that there is an important distinction between what he terms intuitive understanding and reflective understanding, which can shed light on the formation of diverse religious beliefs amongst humans. Intuitive understanding is defined as being the incidence of information that has the potentiality of being consciously accessed, governing a person's expectations and behaviours, whilst the cognitive functions that give rise to the understanding are not consciously accessible.[14] I might come to comprehend, in principle, how the functions work to give rise to the understanding I hold, but I am nevertheless not consciously able to track the brain functions as they operate and result in the understanding. An example of such an intuitive understanding is a small child's expectation that a solid object (seen to be heading towards a solid surface) will bounce off that surface as opposed to melding in to it.[15]

Reflective understanding, on the other hand, is the type of information that is consciously accessible and has the effect of "extending, making sense of, explaining, justifying or communicating" the information that stems from intuitive understanding: for example, a person's explanation that a tennis ball will bounce off a solid surface due to its "impetus" or "force".[16]

[14] Boyer, Pascal (2010, 377). 'Why Evolved Cognition Matters to Understanding Cultural Cognitive Variations.' *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews.* Vol. 35, No 3 – 4, Sep – Dec.
[15] Boyer, Pascal (2010, 378).
[16] Ibid.

Initially, and certainly on philosophical grounds, this distinction between these types of understanding might seem to be vague. However, Boyer does provide further information to satisfy the critic. He elucidates that the usage of the labels intuitive and reflective is not intended to have any bearing on debates in the philosophy of mind that might take a stance on the relative status of each type of understanding.[17] Furthermore, he clarifies that the processes (cognitive functions) that lead to the holding of an intuitive understanding are not consciously accessible due to the fact that the understandings in question tend to "pop up...as a largely automatic and fast result of being presented with the relevant stimuli."[18] Conversely the reflective understandings are reflective as they are more slowly produced, and as such open to conscious consideration and evaluation.[19] So, we see that Boyer utilises the intuitive and reflective understanding distinction to classify two different types of information that we may hold, where the word 'information' refers on the one hand to intuitive beliefs, and on the other to statements or beliefs that offer explanation for the intuitive beliefs.

How does this distinction relate specifically to religious beliefs? Boyer begins by noting that the cognitive faculties that amount to formation of intuitive understanding, and thus lead to reflective understandings, should be seen to be very complex and environment specific systems, best explained as resultant from a process of evolution by natural selection, with an aim to increasing fitness for survival across periods of time.[20] His contention is that intuitive and reflective understandings can aid us in comprehending why it is that religious belief is so prevalent, and why there is a diverse selection of religious belief systems worldwide. As explained, the processes that lead to intuitive understandings are inaccessible to our conscious thought, but are nevertheless embedded in our cognitive functioning. Boyer's claim is that there are many aspects of our cognitive functioning that are themselves

[17] Boyer, Pascal (2010, 378).
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Boyer, Pascal (2010, 378 – 379).

non-religious, but when acting together, give rise to the conditions in which it is highly probable that a religious belief will be formed, and this will materialise as an intuitive understanding as of something beyond our material realm. He states:

> [W]e can explain human sensitivity to particular kinds of supernatural concepts as a by-product of the way human minds operate in ordinary, non-religious contexts. Because our assumptions about fundamental categories like person, artefact, animal, etc. are so entrenched, violations of these assumptions create salient and memorable concepts.[21]

Boyer intends here to highlight that a factor at play in the popularity of religious beliefs, and their ease of transmission amongst humans, is that as agents we tend to better remember propositions that oppose our regular ontological beliefs about the external world around us, as opposed to those propositions that do not violate our regular ontological expectations.

Indeed, for example, the proposition that God is an immaterial, omniscient, omnipotent being involves a clear violation of our usual conception of agents as material and limited. Similarly, sticking to Christian examples, the idea of the virgin birth and resurrection of Christ is another striking violation of our regular understanding as of agents being wholly material and not subject to resurrection, or related in some special manner to a transcendent being. Boyer's claim then is that the very fact that the human mind remembers stories (be they fictional or non-fictional) or propositions that involve these sorts of ontological anomalies much more readily than the type of statements that comply with the regular assumptions we have about different categories of objects or beings, entails that the sorts of propositions or stories associated with religion are very likely to be retained. Furthermore, if the story told contains not only agents that violate regular ontological expectations, but also ascribes the agents with normal human capacities such as thoughts, perceptions or intentions,

[21] Boyer, Pascal (2004). 'Why is Religion Natural?' *The Skeptical Inquirer*. Vol. 28.2. CSI.

then experiments have shown that a human is even more likely to remember the particulars of the fiction or non-fiction.[22] This can partially explain why religious beliefs, which tend to involve propositions or myths that violate everyday ontological assumptions, but retain plausible agential characteristics for the beings involved, are predominant and easily transmitted between humans.[23] Hence this can be seen as playing a role in the dominance of religious belief.

What constitutes the kind of cognitive functions that are consciously inaccessible, but prone to result in the human mind believing, as an intuitive understanding, in religious belief such as belief in God or the transcendent? In Boyer's *Religion: Bound to Believe?* he explains that there are many factors that play a role in predisposing humans to hold intuitive understandings of this sort:

i) Humans tend to anthropomorphise when describing Gods, the supernatural, and the transcendent.

ii) Humans are unique in being able to maintain relationships with agents that are not present to them, e.g. imaginary friends, the dead, and those far away.

iii) Humans have an evolved capacity to be drawn to ritualistic practices, stemming from the need to avoid contamination and predation in the early years of mankind.

iv) Humans are prone to coalitional psychology and thus easily subject to the dynamics of public religious commitment.[24]

Boyer contends that these tendencies are a result of non-religious mental systems and cognitive functions, that together result in a collective functioning that manifests in the

[22] Boyer, Pascal (2008, 2). 'Religion: Bound to Believe?' *Nature.* Vol. 455. NPG.
[23] See Boyer (2000) for the full argument for the existence of an evolved metaphysics being present in human cognitive function, even with infants, such that the assumptions we have about persons, artefacts and animals are deeply embedded in our cognitive apparatus.
[24] (i) – (iv) paraphrased from Boyer, Pascal (2008).

human mind being primed to have an intuitive understanding that consists in religious belief, i.e. belief in the transcendent, a God or Gods. It will be prudent to evaluate each factor in order to analyse whether or not it can be seen to be as such.

With regards to the first two factors (that humans tend to anthropomorphise when describing God or the transcendent, and are unique in maintaining relationships with distant or non-material entities) it seems unclear how these tendencies are a result of non-religious cognitive function. Boyer doesn't provide evidence that the factors are anything more than empirically observable truths about how we function as humans, yet his claim is that these are non-religious cognitive functions that have evolved over time, for the sake of fitness for survival. Nevertheless, if Boyer is correct in his theory, then it does seem that these facts of human behaviour would play a role in making it easy and natural for humans to intuitively believe that there is a God or transcendent in existence, with whom a relationship can be formed.

The third factor (that humans have an evolved capacity to be drawn to ritualistic practices) is of particular interest. Boyer emphasises that given the fact that there is evidence showing that the brain has a "set of security and precaution networks dedicated to potential hazards such as predation and contamination", it is the case that humans find the ritualistic tendencies of organised religions to be particularly appealing.[25] Boyer's claim is that these security networks have evolved over time, originating in the need for avoidance of attacks by predators and aversion to dangerous contamination: the sorts of issues that would have been more important for human-kind in the early years of our existence. These sorts of behaviours would have then manifested in regularly checking one's environment for threats, and regularly cleaning oneself to avoid illness. Hence, Boyer's contention is that a predisposition to take part in regulated action became part of the human cognitive apparatus. If Boyer's

[25] Boyer, Pascal (2008, 2).

theories are empirically sound, then it is clear that the ritualistic aspects of religion, where often specific rituals involve cleaning oneself, are appealing to humans due to this predisposition to regulated behaviour. As such, if Boyer is correct, then we can see that there is a non-religious cognitive function that plays an integral role in the predisposing of humans to be receptive to, and drawn to, systems of religious belief.

The fourth factor deserves some further consideration. Boyer describes that humans have cognitively evolved to have a "coalitional capacity" such that they are unique in being able to form and maintain large social groups in which there is a bond of trust between those that are involved in a "stable coalition of unrelated individuals".[26] This is particularly congruent with religious belief in that when a human proclaims they are of a certain faith, they explicitly and often publically state that they subscribe to the group norms associated with this faith. Boyer remarks that this is important as the cognitive aspects involved in the coalitional capacity to adhere to group norms, mean that in the religious setting, proclamation of adherence to one particular faith will result in the agent being seen by the rest of those who believe in the faith as being trustworthy, and they will more often than not be accepted into the faith.[27] If Boyer is empirically correct then it seems again we have a non-religious cognitive function that presents in a coalitional capacity for adherence to group norms, which in turn plays a role in receptiveness to religious beliefs, and the human ability to be part of a religious community.

Hence, it seems overall that the conjunction of factors (i) – (iv), if correct, can provide a picture of why it is that humans are drawn to religions. Although I wish to remain neutral on the empirical validity of Boyer's claims, the question of whether they can account for how religious beliefs are formed can be separated from the question of their truth. I will defend the

[26] Boyer, Pascal (2008, 2).
[27] Ibid.

thesis that his claims are sufficient to explain religious belief formation. If Boyer is indeed empirically accurate then his CSR does offer an account of why it is common and natural for humans to hold religious beliefs.

2.2. Reflective Understandings Revisited

Of course, Boyer is not the only cultural anthropologist and cognitive scientist to become interested in explaining the popularity and widespread transmission of religious beliefs amongst the human race. Having gone into detail regarding the sorts of factors and cognitive functions that Boyer thinks are involved in producing the intuitive understanding that materialises as religious belief, it seems so far I have merely outlined an account that serves to emphasise that the intuitive understanding as of holding a religious belief is a result of commonalities that exist in all humans. What role do reflective beliefs play and how may they help to account for the diversity of religious beliefs? The work of Daniel Sperber, a cognitive scientist famous for his theory of the epidemiology of beliefs, will be of particular importance in addition to Boyer's findings.

As explained, reflective beliefs differ from intuitive beliefs in that they are entirely consciously accessible, and their role is to offer an explanation for, a justification of, or communication of intuitive beliefs. Sperber, writing before Boyer, also subscribes to the intuitive and reflective belief distinction, but goes into more detail of how particular beliefs and representations become transmitted with ease through human society. In *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach,* Sperber states that the process of accounting for cultural representations "is to explain why some representations are widely shared."[28] He means representations in a sense where reflective beliefs would fit into this category. The reflective beliefs that are associated with religious beliefs would be the sorts of theistic propositions or

[28] Sperber, Dan (1996, 7). 'The Epidemiology of Beliefs' in *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach.* Blackwell.

myths that vary from faith to faith, and classified as representations on Sperber's account. These are the kinds of beliefs that explain and justify the intuitive belief that 'God exists' or 'There is a transcendent higher power', and are agreed upon within communities but disagreed upon between different communities. Boyer described these sorts of beliefs as being consciously accessible in that the thought processes that produce them can be analysed and considered consciously: they vary due to the external influence from the community in which one is situated. The challenge will be to provide an account that goes into more detail of why it is these sorts of beliefs differ, despite the underlying commonalities in intuitive beliefs, and why it is that they are easily transmitted.

Sperber contends that an explanation for why certain representations are transmitted with ease through a community is that particular psychological aspects at play that mean that the reflective beliefs in question are more likely to be retained and retold. These include the "ease with which a particular representation can be memorised" and "a motivation to communicate the content of the representation."[29] In the case of religion, we saw from Boyer's studies that there is evidence that humans find it much easier to retain the sorts of propositions that violate normal ontological expectations, meaning that religious beliefs are prone to being committed to memory. Further, those who hold beliefs will be motivated to communicate them just because of their religious nature: they might believe that it is important to pass on the word of God to others, or ensure that others are at least aware of the sorts of theistic propositions that explain, justify or communicate (specific to the faith in question) the intuitive understanding as of religious belief. In this way these theistic propositions, such as 'Jesus was the Son of God' or 'Sunday is the Sabbath', become connected to the initial intuitive religious belief in God, by forming part of the overall picture

[29] Sperber, Dan (1996, 9).

that serves to explain, justify and communicate the original intuitive understanding, and the attendant practices associated with the particular faith of the community.

Why though, is it the case that there are many world religions and a diverse number of communities of different faiths? Returning to Boyer, remember that his view is that the non-religious cognitive functions, resultant from complex evolved systems, function as a whole to produce the common intuitive understanding that there exists a God, Gods or some kind of transcendence. He states:

> The whole point of evolved systems is that they are learning systems, which pick up specific appropriate information in the environments, and one should expect these to produce appropriate, that is, different results in different places.[30]

So, despite the commonalities at root in the tacit assumptions and cognitive processes that are involved in the production of religious belief, the diversity of faiths worldwide can be explained by cognitive science as a direct result of the fact that reflective understandings are relative to the particular community or culture in which the believer is resident or subscribed to. The variation in reflective beliefs is as such then specific to the theistic environment in which one is present, explaining why a particular believer born in one place might believe in the tribal faith surrounding their intuition that there is a transcendent, whereas elsewhere another person believes in Buddhism as an explanation for their intuition that there is a transcendent.

If we think back to the common characteristics discussed earlier, like the tendency to anthropomorphise when talking about religious agents, or the predisposition to be involved in ritualistic behaviours, we can see how these factors might interact with different cultural forms to give rise to distinct religious beliefs. One example Boyer repeatedly uses is his field

[30] Boyer, Pascal (2010, 380).

research whilst living with and studying the Fang tribe of Cameroon. This particular tribe's religious beliefs are centred round the conviction that there are two creator Gods, one responsible for creating natural things and the other for creating the social and cultural institutions known to the Fang.[31] In addition to these Gods they also believe in the existence of ghosts and ancestors who may have affects on the material world from the transcendent realm. Here we see that the Fang's intuitive understanding as of religious belief, manifesting in a bitheistic faith, interacts with their community by resulting in reflective beliefs that explain the role of each God, the ancestors and ghosts. They believe that when a person dies, if they are not buried correctly and with the right rituals, then the ghost will affect the living community by plaguing them with illness. They further believe that if other rituals are not performed correctly by the living, dead ancestors will punish the community. Hence the predisposition to be drawn to ritualistic processes is reinforced by the reflective belief that the dead will punish the living if rituals are not performed correctly.

On the other hand, in a Christian community, where the intuitive understanding as of religious belief manifests in a monotheistic tradition, predisposition to ritualistic behaviour would be reinforced by such practices as Baptism or taking part in Holy Communion, where reflective beliefs are such that these practices are important sacraments involved in being accepted to the church, and a demonstration of faith, respectively. Hence, it seems if we consider Boyer and Sperber together, their accounting for the common intuitive understanding as of religious belief, combined with the reflective beliefs that are specific to particular communities, results in an overall explanation that can illustrate why religious beliefs arise, and why the reflective beliefs associated with particular faiths come to be transmitted and so diverse.

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[31] Boyer, Pascal (1994, 43). *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas.*

2.3. CSR as a Solution to the Diversity Problem

The diversity problem was classified as twofold in chapter 1. In order to solve the issue a theory must: (i) offer an account of how religious beliefs are formed, that is not subject to the criticisms levelled at Plantinga's theory; and (ii) account for the diversity of beliefs present. By offering a theory that explains that religious beliefs are natural for humans to hold, given the strength of the non-religious cognitive functioning and processes that are involved in the production of religious belief, I contend that if Boyer is correct, then his theory does provide such an account. By providing a naturalistic explanation of the prevalence of religious belief formation, Boyer removes the need for reliance upon the singular *sensus divinitatis*, the type which was revitalised in Plantinga's reformed epistemology. Instead of relying on the *sensus divinitatis* the explanation states that there are many complex cognitive systems involved in brain functioning, some of which have evolved over time, which lead to common intuitive understandings as of religious belief.

This is advantageous as it avoids the issues highlighted in chapter 1 that are problematic for Plantinga's theory. There is no insufficiency problem for the CSR of Boyer and Sperber as their account explains why it is that religious beliefs are diverse. There is no analogy problem for their account because they do not restrict their explanation to one particular faith; the CSR gives reasons why each believer forms religious beliefs and why they hold the reflective beliefs that they hold. The unreliability problem (that diversity suggests unreliability of the cognitive faculties involved in belief-formation) does not apply to the CSR as the diversity is explained not by the cognitive functioning that results in the intuitive understanding, but in the reflective beliefs that are used to explain, justify and communicate the initial religious beliefs. These reflective beliefs are such that they vary from culture to culture, and are often based on longstanding tradition and religious scripture. Even though the reflective beliefs differ, the intuitive understanding as of religious belief is similar

across cultures, and so the unreliability of those cognitive functions involved in the production of religious belief need not be called into question in the same way as the *sensus divinitatis*. I will consider in more detail the question of whether diversity undermines the reliability of the processes involved in reflective belief production in the latter half of this thesis.

We have seen that if the CSR discussed is correct, religious beliefs manifest themselves in many humans as an "emergent property of standard cognitive capabilities."[32] Even though there are commonalities in the intuitive understandings that manifest as religious belief, the consciously accessible reflective explanations differ, and so there is diversity of religious belief. Further the CSR does not face the same problems as Plantinga's account of religious belief formation. Hence, unlike Plantinga's reformed epistemology, the CSR can explain why there is religious diversity. In the next two chapters I consider further the question of whether or not the CSR explanation renders religious beliefs irrational.

[32] Boyer, Pascal (2008).

Chapter 3: The Rationality of Religious Belief

Having discussed the twofold diversity problem and the solution offered by the cognitive science of religion, I turn now to the question of whether or not religious beliefs are rational, even if they are proven to be a by-product of the complex non-religious cognitive systems and faculties that exist within the human mind. If the cognitive science of religion is correct, and our brains are predispositioned to function such that there is a high probability that we form religious beliefs, this raises the question of whether or not this explanation renders said beliefs irrational. I will not be concerned here with providing an argument for the truth or falsity of the religious beliefs in question, rather I will focus on showing that the believer under consideration can be seen to be rational in their belief given their particular epistemic situation.

For two reasons, I think that the rationality question can be separated from the truth or falsity question. Firstly, I argue in agreement with Plantinga, that belief in God is properly basic given certain circumstances. I show that this means that rationality for beliefs need not depend on evidence pertaining to their truth or falsity, and explain why this theory can be compatible with the CSR. Secondly, it seems to me that we rationally believe many things that we do not know the truth or falsity of; for example, a child rationally believes in Santa Claus because his parents say that he exists. A university student might rationally believe in the truth of a complex mathematical theory, despite not personally understanding it, based on the teachings of her lecturer. A religious person may rationally believe the teachings of their faith, based on the trusted word of the particular scripture, or religious authority, in the community, whilst perhaps not fully comprehending or understanding the truths. Hence, it is

clear that there is an important aspect testimony at play in the rationality of religious belief, which I discuss in the latter third of this chapter.

3.1. The Proper Basicality of Beliefs

The proper basicality of religious belief stems from Plantinga's contention that classical foundationalism (CF) is "self-referentially incoherent."[33] He explains that evidentialist objections to theistic belief, i.e. the sort of objection that states there is insufficient evidence for holding religious beliefs, as such meaning they are irrational, face difficulties because they are rooted in the problematic CF. CF is characterised as follows:

> A belief is acceptable for a person iff it is either properly basic (self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses for that person), or believed on the evidential basis of propositions that are acceptable and that support it deductively, inductively or abductively.[34]

Foundationalism in general is the epistemological claim that there are some beliefs that we hold that form a bed-rock for our other beliefs, and these foundational beliefs are non-inferentially held. This contrasts to coherentist epistemology, where the contention is that there are no such foundational beliefs; rather our beliefs are justified in relation to their consistency with the rest of our belief set. Looking back to the above definition for CF, proper basicality is the foundationalist claim that there are some bed-rock beliefs that are non-inferentially held by being self-evident, incorrigible or evident to the believer's senses. An example of this sort of properly basic belief would be a belief that the external world exists: we can all agree that it is evident to our senses that there does exists an external world and this belief can form a foundation for the rest of our beliefs. Another instance of a properly basic belief would be Rene Descartes' famous cogito, 'I think, therefore I am'.

[33] Plantinga, Alvin (2000, 101).
[34] Plantinga, Alvin (2000, 84 – 85).

Plantinga's issue with CF is that it is not itself properly basic according to its own criteria for proper basicality: it is not self-evident, incorrigible or evident to the senses that it is true, and it is not believed on the evidential basis of propositions that are acceptable and support it deductively, inductively or abductively. As such, due to its self-referential incoherence, CF cannot be used as a basis for the evidentialist objection that religious beliefs lack sufficient reasons to be held and are epistemically suspect. Further, the problems with CF means that there may be other criteria for the proper basicality of belief, meaning that the religious believer may claim their experiential belief in God is properly basic, even if there is no concrete evidence beyond their experience to justify their belief. In this way, the religious believer can claim that their experience as of perceiving the external world and (on Plantinga's account) seeing God's work in the world, means that their belief in God is properly basic. As discussed in chapter 1, the *sensus divinitatis* receives inputs like the perception of a majestic mountain range, which results in the output of belief in God. This is analogous to believing in the external world via the perception that it does indeed exist.

Plantinga's discussion of the way in which a believer might come to the conclusion that their belief is properly basic involves imagining a woman who has grown up in a particular religious community, but has not ever found any of the scripture or teachings by the religious authorities to be convincing. For Plantinga, this woman is a Christian. She is aware of the arguments both for and against her beliefs but she does not see any of them to be compelling for either side of the debate. Nevertheless, she has an overwhelming intuition that her religious belief is correct, and so given she is not "flouting any epistemic duty", her belief is properly basic.[35] If I believe that there is a table in the room, based on my immediate sense perception, and in spite of knowing arguments for or against this belief (such as the contention that an evil demon might be deceiving me so that I think there is a table in the

[35] Plantinga, Alvin (2000, 100 – 101).

room), then it is clear my belief in the table existing is properly basic. I am rational in holding my belief. I am not failing to fulfil any doxastic duty. Analogously, the Christian woman is rational and need not provide any further evidence for her beliefs. I am rational in believing in the table's existence, and the Christian woman in her belief that God exists, even though there might not be a definitive proof of the truth of the belief available to me.

In defence of this kind of argument that the believer is rational as long as they are not failing to fulfil any doxastic duty, we can utilise Richard Swinburne's Principle of Credulity in order to give more substance to the claim that my belief in the external world is rational, and the Christian woman's belief in God is so too. Swinburne's principle states:

> [I]t is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations), if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that x is present (and has some characteristic), then probably x is present (and has that characteristic); what one seems to perceive is probably so.[36]

He adds that "in the absence of counter-evidence, we should believe that things are as they seem to be", serving to emphasise that the way that things appear to us is sufficient grounds to rationally believe that we are perceiving things as the way that they actually are. Hence, my belief is validated by Swinburne's principle. The Christian woman is being presented to such that she believes God is in existence, she has not failed to perform any epistemic inquiry that might affect her belief detrimentally, and so she is rational in believing that God does indeed exists. Her belief is properly basic, and she has no reason to think that she perceives things in a way that is not the way that they are in actuality.

Plantinga further elucidates, in his earlier work *Is Belief in God Properly Basic?* that beliefs related to a belief in God can be candidates for being held in the properly basic way.[37] So, returning to the example of the Christian woman who thinks her belief in God is properly

[36] Swinburne, Richard (2004, 303). *The Existence of God.* OUP.
[37] Plantinga, Alvin (1981, 46 - 47). *Is Belief in God Properly Basic? Noûs.* Vol. 15, No. 1. Blackwell.

basic, it might actually be that her belief that 'God has created everything' is properly basic, grounded in her perception of the external world. Other properly basic beliefs might include things like 'God is speaking to me', 'God disapproves of what I have done', or 'God is to be praised'.[38] Nevertheless, it seems that the beliefs just quoted can be said to "immediately and self-evidently entail" the former proposition that 'God exists', so it too may be seen as properly basic in a loose sense.[39] Again, we see that religious beliefs can indeed be said to be properly basic, and need not be seen to provide definitive evidence for their truth it order to be held rationally.

3.2. Compatibility of CSR with Proper Basicality

For Plantinga, properly basic Christian belief is a result of the working of the *sensus divinitatis*, but as explained in chapter 1, the function of this cognitive faculty cannot sufficiently account for the fact that there are many world religions. If the CSR of Boyer and Sperber is correct, then at root religious belief manifests as a common intuitive understanding amongst humans: can rationality be retained for this kind of belief? I contend that, counter to the assumption that CSR undermines rationality of religious beliefs, the accounts given by Boyer and Sperber of religious belief formation can be seen to be compatible with the proper basicality of belief. As explained in chapter 2, their CSR has an advantage over Plantinga's utilisation of the Christian *sensus divinitatis* and reformed epistemology, by providing an account that offers a solution to the diversity problem. As such the question arises of how it can be epistemically justified for religious believers to hold their beliefs, despite the usage of CSR to answer the diversity problem.

How might the CSR be compatible with the proper basicality thesis? Firstly, it is interesting to note what Sperber has to say regarding the rationality of intuitive beliefs:

[38] Plantinga, Alvin (1981, 47).
[39] Ibid.

> Intuitive beliefs owe their rationality to essentially innate and therefore universal perceptual and inferential mechanisms; as a result, they do not vary dramatically and are essentially mutually consistent or concilable across cultures.[40]

Here it seems clear that Sperber intends to highlight that the rationality and justification one has in holding intuitive beliefs stems from the fact that they come naturally from the cognitive functioning of the human mind. In the same way that my belief that there is a table in the room arises naturally from the way my senses perceive there to be a table present, intuitive beliefs arise naturally from the relevant cognitive functions. Boyer explained that religious beliefs arise naturally from those cognitive functions and tendencies described in chapter 2. Due to the fact that at root the intuitive religious beliefs are similar, coming from the same cognitive functions in each person and manifesting as a belief in a God, Gods or the transcendent, they can be seen to be universal and cross-culturally pervasive. Boyer might argue that his theory of the naturalness of religious ideas does not show that religious beliefs are the result of universal perceptual mechanisms. Yet, universal inferential mechanisms seems to fit with his thesis in that the cause of the formation of the religious beliefs is explained as being the collective cognitive functioning that includes things like complex systems in the brain that are normally involved in non-religious functions, and common tendencies of humans. As such the outcome of these functions is a sort of unconscious inference; an intuition whose origins the believer is not consciously aware of. In this way then, the rationality for the belief just seems to be a result of the fact that it comes from this sort of process. Analogously to the rationality of believing a table is in the room, by perceiving that it is so, the rationality for the intuitive belief comes from the natural processes by which it is produced, and so there is reason to trust the belief which results.

[40] Sperber, Dan (1996, 18).

However, epistemically speaking, how can we really infer from the fact that we all have these common tendencies and non-religious complex cognitive systems underlying our religious beliefs, that it is rational to hold those beliefs? It may well be the case that an evil demon programmed our brains to work in that way in order to deceive us for some end unknown to us. Sperber makes a claim that we should trust that our epistemic positions are robust, and assume that we are rational, because the evolution of increasingly complex cognitive systems over the history of life on earth suggests that we possess an "epistemologically sound cognitive system" that serves to allow us to effectively interact with our environments.[41] It seems that this sort of argument works for things like our belief in the external world: we have every reason to trust that the external world exists, given our perception that it does. It can be that we might hypothesise situations where we are being deceived about the existence of the external world, or where our perceptual and cognitive apparatus might be impaired, but nevertheless given the universality of the belief that the external world exists, and our trust in our perceptual and cognitive faculties, it seems rational to hold the belief that the external world exists.

Yet, religious beliefs don't seem to necessarily be products of perceptual experience, although sometimes might be a result of this i.e. in religious experiences that solidify, form or change one's religious beliefs. Can the proper basicality of beliefs help in justifying the CSR account of intuitive religious beliefs, and so strengthen Sperber's claim that they are rational just because they are products of evolved complex systems that must be seen to be epistemologically sound? It seems to me that the religious believer may argue that they think the cognitive science is a very compelling explanation of how religious beliefs naturally arise in the human mind. Then, they may add that they have a strong overwhelming intuition that it was God who created the mind in this way. So, the believer holds the belief 'God created the

[41] Sperber, Dan (1996, 11).

human mind such that religious beliefs are produced naturally', more simply put as 'God created everything'.

For argument's sake, imagine I believe that this is indeed the case. I think a God, or other creator, designed my mind such that religious belief would materialise as a natural by-product of regular brain function. I am fully aware of arguments for and against this belief, but find neither of them convincing. I have grown up in an environment, or at least spent time in an environment, where others provide testimony or scripture to support my belief but I don't think they have worked things out satisfactorily. Nevertheless, I strongly feel that my belief is correct. It's properly basic for me, and entails proper basicality for the belief that 'God exists'. I'm doing my "level best" and I'm not flouting any obvious epistemic duty.[42] Surely, in holding my belief I am rational? It seems like in Plantinga's example of the Christian woman, I am not in an epistemically dubious situation. Of course, it may well be the case that there are defeaters, unbeknownst to me, that I become aware of in the future, but before that happens I am indeed rationally holding my belief. There is nothing more I could do, internally or externally, to prove my belief to be justified. If no defeaters arise then I will remain in the best possible epistemic position available to me: namely one where I have thought through the issues surrounding the holding of my belief, and despite this remain persuaded only by my own intuition. Further, this shows that the cognitive science explanation can be built into my considerations of my beliefs, and need not be seen as undermining the rationality of the beliefs. By showing the compatibility of the CSR with the proper basicality of beliefs, Sperber's thesis that we are rational due to having evolved complex cognitive functions aimed at representing our environment well, is reinforced by adding in the epistemological thesis of the proper basicality of belief. Hence, religious beliefs

[42] Plantinga, Alvin (2000, 101).

that manifest as an intuitive understanding can be said to be rationally held by those who maintain them.

3.3. Testimony and Rationality

Having outlined an argument for the rationality of holding religious beliefs, which are intuitive understandings on the cognitive science account, the focus now turns to how the reflective beliefs that are particular to each faith or community might have rationality. It is useful again to first take note of what Sperber deems to be the grounds for the rationality of these beliefs, before embarking on a discussion of how philosophical considerations can help to bolster his claims. Sperber states that reflective beliefs are held "not in virtue of their content, but in virtue of their ***source***", explaining the reflective beliefs that religious believers hold may gain rationality from a source (e.g. the testimony of a religious preacher) as long as there are "rational grounds to trust that source."[43] So it seems that the epistemology of testimony will play an integral role in justifying the rationality of holding reflective beliefs, the sort of which varies between different faiths and cultures.

There are two points to consider before outlining a framework within which trusting the testimony of the religious authority can justify holding specific reflective beliefs. The first point is, as Sperber emphasises, that there is something different about religious reflective beliefs, compared to reflective beliefs in other fields. He speaks of reflective beliefs in science, stating that when the scientific beliefs of scientists are understood well, they will "include an explicit account of the rational grounds to hold them."[44] In stating this, I take Sperber to be highlighting that in the field of science, reflective beliefs normally are such that they intrinsically demonstrate that there is justification for holding them, by the fact that expert scientists adhere to them. If the scientist were unsure about a theory or had

[43] Sperber, Dan (1996, 18).
[44] Ibid.

experimental results that called it in to question, then there wouldn't be such explicit grounds to rationally agree with the theory. However, if the theory is well understood and verified by the experts then of course there will be grounds to believe the testimony of the scientist, even if you do not fully comprehend the truth of the reflective beliefs in question.

In the religious case however, even the experts may find some reflective beliefs to be mysterious to them. Sperber explains that often, in the religious sphere, even expert theologians and religious authorities can find the reflective beliefs that they teach others to be mystifying, and so cannot give a full explanation for them in the same way that a scientist might. He uses the example of the belief 'God is everywhere', emphasising that even an expert authority in the religious sphere might find this reflective belief to be something beyond human explanation: as such, "they too accept it on authority."[45] Hence, unlike the science example where an expert may easily independently verify a hypothesis that results in scientific reflective beliefs, the religious case seems to be more complex in that the expert theologian often believes their reflective beliefs on testimony (be it from scripture, or another authority). So, it seems that if we are to justify reflective beliefs through testimony, then we will have to take this fact into consideration.

Secondly, another important point to deal with before offering an account of the rationality of trusting expert testimony is the question of how it can even be sensible for beliefs that are in disagreement with one another to be said to be rational. Imagine that my reflective beliefs with regards to religion differ from yours in a way that they are contradictory: how can we both be equally rational? Sperber, when talking of why it is that reflective beliefs end up being so diverse across cultures and communities, states:

[45] Sperber, Dan (1996, 17).

> That different people should trust different sources of beliefs – I, my educators, you, yours – is exactly what you would expect if they are all rational in the same way and in the same world, and merely located in different parts in this world.[46]

Sperber again draws attention to his contention that we are all rational just by being evolved creatures with highly functioning complex cognitive systems, which must be epistemologically sound. He thinks that because we have evolved in a way that our brain functioning has become more complex over time, with an aim to increasing our fitness for survival, our cognitive functions are such that they are aimed at producing beliefs that reflect our environment well. Due to this we should trust that our beliefs are rational. Also, his argument is that it is unsurprising reflective beliefs differ, as we are all growing up and living in different places, with different sources of belief to trust, and hence there is variation. Yet, his discussion does not account for the issue of people believing contrary things, and how they might remain rational despite this. This is a problem in epistemology, as some theorists would contend that if two or more people hold contradictory beliefs, then there is reason to believe that one or more are not justified. If my religious belief is contradictory to yours then ought we to abandon our beliefs due to this fact? In order to proceed we must consider this issue in more detail.

The epistemology of disagreement deals with the issues surrounding the rationality of believers where one of them holds a belief, P, and the other holds a contradictory belief, not-P. Can both of these believers be rational despite the contradiction in their beliefs? Are they both entitled to their beliefs? Imagine a case where Bob believes that 6 x 7 = 42, but Tim believes that 6 x 7 = 43. In this case, it is clear that Tim has some more work to do: a) he has the wrong answer; and b) although he might be sure of his correctness, he could have done better in working out his answer. Nicholas Wolsterstorff states:

[46] Sperber, Dan (1996, 18 – 19).

> [W]hat makes a person not entitled to some belief is that there is some practice of inquiry that he failed to employ but ought to have employed with a seriousness and competence such that, had he done so, he would not have that belief.[47]

So it's clear that Tim, if he had competently worked out the sum, would also believe that 6 x 7 = 42. Consequently, he's not entitled to his belief that the answer is 43. How might this reasoning apply to the religious belief case? Bob might say he believes that those who perform bad deeds will be reincarnated as lower life forms. Tim might counter that he believes those who sin will go to Hell. Who is right? Is one more rational than the other? If it is the case that both Bob and Tim have done all they could possibly do in terms of inquiry, and as such are not ignoring any doxastic duty they might have, then they can both be entitled to, and rational in, holding their beliefs.

To summarise then, we have seen that reflective beliefs and their rationality can be argued to be dependent on the source of the belief, i.e. the testimony of a religious authority. It is unproblematic for there to be varied and contradictory reflective beliefs, as authorities differ across cultures and communities, and considerations from epistemology show us that as long as believers are not ignoring any doxastic duty then they may rationally hold contradictory beliefs. Even so, our job is not yet done. How can we justify the deference to the testimony of the religious authority in question? Given we cannot rely on implicit justification in the testimony in the same way that we might when we trust the expert scientist's verified theory, how can we be rational in believing testimony from the religious authority?

Richard Fumerton claims that the vital aspect of deference to any authority, or belief based on testimony, is that "we must have some reason to believe that the assertions in

[47] Wolsterstorff, Nicholas (2014, 329). 'The Significance of Inexplicable Disagreement.' In Callahan, Laura F. And O'Connor, Timothy (ed.), pp 317 – 329. *Religious Faith and Intellectual Virtue.* OUP.

question are likely to be true".[48] Therefore, an account must be provided that can explain the relevant grounds for believing that the assertions made by the expert in question are to be trusted. Fumerton provides a framework as follows:

1) Jones said that P in conditions C (where C includes a description of Jones, his qualifications as an authority, and the circumstances under which he made the assertion).
2) People who make assertions like P in conditions C are usually saying something true.
3) Hence, P.[49]

We might tailor this to the religious testimony case as follows:

1*) Jones said that "Jesus was the Son of God" in conditions C.

C) Jones is a knowledgeable authority on the Christian faith. He is well versed in the relevant scripture, regularly delivers sermons in the local Church, and has the relevant qualifications to justify his position. His assertion P is made in one of his sermons.

2*) People who make assertions like P in conditions C are usually saying something true.

3*) Hence, Jesus was the Son of God.

However, it seem to me that there is something amiss in the reasoning here when it is applied to the religious case. With regards to 2*) it seems that the condition that the person who asserts P in C is usually saying something true is going to be a difficult condition to meet in the case of religious propositions. This is due to the fact that it is a challenging task to independently verify that the authority making the assertions is usually saying something true. Of course there may be religious experience to back up the assertion but this might not

[48]Fumerton, Richard (2006, 77). 'The Epistemic Role of Testimony: Internalist and Externalist Perspectives.' In Lackey, Jennifer & Sosa, Ernest (ed.), pg 77 – 91. *The Epistemology of Testimony*. OUP.
[49] Argument in Fumerton, Richard (2006, 80),

always be the case, and if it were then it would likely be experienced directly only by the authority themselves. Nevertheless, the conditions described in C constitute sufficient grounds to trust Jones' testimony, and so it does seem legitimate for the believer to take his assertion as reliable given his expertise. Swinburne would argue via his principle of testimony, that given the principle of credulity (that we have reason to believe x if we perceive x) we have sufficient reason (in the absence of evidence to the contrary) to trust the testimony because that person claims to have experienced or perceived something that we have not.[50] Hence, the believer could rationally hold that Jesus was the Son of God.

Additionally, in the religious case it seems that there are implicit beliefs that accompany the trust in the religious authority or scripture, but in a different way to Sperber's scientific case. In the case of trusting the scientist, we believe that this is rational to do so because the scientist has empirically verified their theory. In the religious case, sticking to Christian beliefs, I might believe that 'The authority is ordained by God in some way' or 'Scripture is the word of God'. This belief would be rationalised in relation to the properly basic belief that 'God exists', which justifies the belief that the authority can be trusted by being chosen by God to convey religious truth. In the Catholic church believers trust the religious testimony of the Pope because he is believed to be a messenger for God on earth, possessing a spiritual authority that others do not have. The Catholic believer has their intuitive understanding that God exists, and their grounds for trusting the testimony of the Pope stems not only from his religious expertise, but also from their belief that he is intimately connected to God. As such, it seems there are beliefs surrounding the conditions C that convey additional grounds to trust in the testimony of the authority.

Further, in the face of no defeaters, it would be rational for the believer to take Jones at his word. In fact it seems it would be coherent for the believer to argue that they assume

[50] Swinburne, Richard (2004, 309).

the truth of 2*), and hence the validity of the conclusion, based on the implicit beliefs described above, in which they hold that the authority is to be trusted. These implicit beliefs would be properly basic due to relating to the properly basic belief that God does exist. Hence, it would seem that in some sense the rationality of believing the testimony of religious authorities is based on the rationality of the intuitive beliefs that one holds.

The prevalence of the intuition of religious belief shows that it is highly likely that religious beliefs in a God, Gods or the transcendent are formed. As a result of this intuitive belief, reflective beliefs are utilised to explain, justify and communicate these intuitions. As Plantinga explained, beliefs like 'God is everything', 'God created everything' and 'God is to be praised' can be properly basic, but also entail the proper basicality of the belief 'God exists'. Reflective beliefs can be rational purely on the grounds of trusting the expert testimony of a religious authority. We can imagine that a particular authority might not claim to have a spiritual connection with the transcendent, but nevertheless is an expert on the faith in question, so there would still be sufficient grounds to trust their testimony. In other cases there is the implicit belief that the particular religious authority does have a spiritual connection with the higher power in question, and so this belief aids justification for believing their testimony. So, it seems that the overall picture of the rationality of intuitive and reflective beliefs can be seen not as having mutually exclusive reasons for being held, but rather the different beliefs are intimately connected in their justification.

Table 1:

Belief Type	Example of Belief	Justification
Intuitive Belief	God exists	Properly Basic
Reflective Belief	God created the world in seven days	Testimony
Implicit Belief	God uses religious authorities and scripture to convey religious truth to us	Properly Basic

As shown in table 1, by this I mean that on the one hand, intuitive beliefs can be seen to be rational in their properly basicality, and on the other hand, although reflective beliefs come from testimony unique to the faith in question, they too rely on the contents of implicit beliefs, and so, proper basicality. I have not classed the implicit belief as an intuitive belief as on the cognitive science account the intuitive religious beliefs are just the beliefs in a God, Gods or transcendent. In this sense then the implicit belief is not itself an intuitive belief, despite being connected to the intuitive belief. The believer intuitively believes in God in a properly basic way. They then hold reflective beliefs on the testimony of scripture or authority, and the reason to trust this testimony is their properly basic belief that God uses these sources to convey religious truth. Consequently the religious believer would be rational in believing the reflective understandings that their particular faith provides as explanations of their intuitive understandings, through trusting the testimony of the religious authority, and this is rational due to the authority's expertise, and as a result of the implicit beliefs that this testimony is in some sense the word, or word, of a God, Gods or transcendence. Hence, I conclude here before moving on to dealing with objections in chapter 4, that the CSR as explained by Boyer and Sperber can be combined with philosophical considerations in order to show that both intuitive and reflective beliefs can be rationally held.

Chapter 4: Objections

In this final chapter I consider objections to my thesis that the CSR can offer a solution to the diversity problem whilst still retaining rationality for those who hold religious beliefs and subscribe to different faiths. Minor objections, such as the problem of two or more people believing contradictory beliefs, were dealt with along the way in chapter 3. Here I am concerned with three major objections: (i) that the CSR undermines any rationality that religious beliefs might hold; (ii) that my utilisation of Plantinga's proper basicality opens up my account to the liberality objection; and (iii) that the testimony of religious authorities opens up the account to an infinite regress of testimony, in a way that is detrimental to justification.

4.1. CSR in Opposition to Rationality?

The most obvious objection to my thesis is that the CSR undermines the rationality of religious beliefs by explaining that they are formed merely as a by-product of brain function. Due to this fact they can be seen as a mere quirk of the complex systems contained in the human mind, and the staunch atheist may argue that all the cognitive science serves to do is to prove that holding religious beliefs shouldn't be seen to be epistemically permissible. This sort of objector might argue that the belief-forming processes described by the CSR, specifically said to be non-religious tendencies or cognitive functions, suggest that religious belief is nothing more than a fiction accidentally produced by the human mind. The cognitive science simply provides an outline of the source of religious beliefs, and an appreciation of this undermines any reasons someone might have to hold that belief.

There are several issues with this sort of objection. The first is that as Plantinga would point out, this sort of objector is mistakenly basing their *de jure* objection on an unsuccessful

de facto objection. The *de facto* objection claims that religious beliefs are false, and the *de jure* objection is rather the objection that religious beliefs are irrational and unjustified.[51] This is problematic for the objector claiming that the CSR undermines the rationality of religious belief as they seem to be assuming that the *de facto* objection is successful i.e. that the CSR shows that religious beliefs are false.

However, Boyer and Sperber do not make any such claim. Rather, if true, their theories point to religious beliefs arising naturally. This does not entail their falsity, and as discussed in chapter 3, the cognitive faculties involved can sensibly be claimed to have been designed by God to work in that manner. By claiming that the CSR undermines rationality because it suggests that religious beliefs are false, objectors who subscribe to this sort of view fail to note that a belief may be rational even if it is not definitively known whether it is true or false. We can imagine a jury believing that the defendant is guilty, based on the evidence presented to them, when in reality the defendant is innocent. They remain rational in their decision despite the fact that the defendant is not guilty. Analogously, imagine the Christian who believes in God, based on their intuitive understanding and explained by their reflective beliefs particular to their specific Christian community. If religious belief is shown to be false by the CSR, then it seems they can still be justified in holding their beliefs, due to some of those beliefs being properly basic, and the others being based on the testimony of scripture and authority.

A slightly different construal of the objection might be that basing your reflective beliefs on the testimony of authority and scripture is irrational if the CSR does indeed somehow undermine the justification of religious beliefs. Let's imagine a situation where the origins of a belief would undermine the reasons to hold it. If I trust a Doctor's claim that I need life-threatening surgery in order to survive, and then I find out that he reached this

[51] Plantinga, Alvin (2000, 140).

conclusion based on tossing a coin, then it seems clear that I have lost my reason to trust him. The objector might claim the religious case is analogous because the CSR shows that beyond the similarities in intuitive understandings, reflective beliefs are culturally relative, so the claims of the religious authority are arbitrary in the same sense as if they were based on the tossing of a coin. In the case of the Doctor, the process by which he reached the belief that he should advise me to have the surgery clearly undermines my reasons to believe him. However, in the religious belief case something seems to be different. Just because the CSR explains the processes that form religious beliefs, and why reflective belief vary from culture to culture, it seems that this need not undermine the rationality of holding the belief, or trusting the testimony of the religious authority.

On the CSR explanation, it is not the case that the believer tosses a coin and suddenly decides to hold a religious belief. Instead, the believer's intuitive religious belief arises as a product of their cognitive functioning; this is not analogous to coin tossing as it is (according to Boyer) a result of a combination of human tendencies and non-religious cognitive functions. Reflective beliefs are then influenced by your culture or particular religious community: this also does not seem to be analogous to coin tossing as it is not often the case that believers choose which community they are born into. Of course, a believer may change faith, but this is usually a product of considering reasons to change, and as such perhaps a preference for the reflective beliefs of another tradition, as opposed to a random decision based on a coin toss. The mere fact that there is a cognitive science explanation for why religious beliefs are held does not detract from the holding of the belief, and the processes involved in religious belief formation are more complex than a mere coin toss. Hence, the objection is unsuccessful.

4.2. The Great Pumpkin Rises Again?

A criticism levelled at Plantinga's proper basicality of belief is characterised as the Great Pumpkin (GP) objection, and more recently, the Son of Great Pumpkin (SGP) objection. The GP objection states that allowing for proper basicality of religious beliefs is far too liberal, in that a properly basic belief for any far-fetched entity could easily be argued for analogously to the way in which religious beliefs are argued to be properly basic. As such, we may argue that belief in the Great Pumpkin rising from the pumpkin patch every year on Halloween is properly basic.[52] The SGP objection is intended to further the GP objection, arguing that any given community (however far-fetched) might legitimately claim their beliefs to be properly basic, in the same way that Plantinga argues for his Christian beliefs being properly basic. Consequently, if we combine these two issues, we get an objection to proper basicality that can be termed the liberality objection. This consists in the claim that allowing proper basicality for religious belief puts us on a slippery slope towards allowing proper basicality and rationality for just about any belief, no matter how ad hoc or ridiculous we might deem that belief to be.

In arguing in favour of Plantinga's proper basicality of religious beliefs, and showing its compatibility with the CSR, my thesis is open to this liberality objection. Nevertheless, I think that a reply can be sensibly given. Although it is difficult to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for which communities would or would not be able to claim proper basicality for their beliefs, a good starting point is to state that the intuitive understanding that they have at root in their religion should be one that manifests as a belief in a God, Gods, transcendence, a higher power, or some sort of spiritual reality around which the faith is centred. This was the kind of belief that Sperber claimed to be universal, and that Boyer similarly thinks is the core commonality at the root of all religions.

[52] Plantinga, Alvin (2000, 344).

Although this will still mean a liberal system, it does narrow the field sufficiently to discount wildly ad hoc suggestions. Yet, it seems as though the believer in the Great Pumpkin might still be able to claim proper basicality for their belief. Here I must bite the bullet: if it really is the case that someone has an overwhelming intuition that the Great Pumpkin rises from the pumpkin patch each year, and they hold a set of reflective beliefs that explain, justify and communicate this intuition, in a community where there are authorities on the Great Pumpkin's import and work, then they can sensibly claim that their belief in the Great Pumpkin is properly basic for them. At the end of the day, like Plantinga's Christian woman, provided they are not ignoring some doxastic duty, the believer in the Great Pumpkin will be justified in their belief.[53] I don't see this conclusion to be hugely controversial; of course we think that belief in the Great Pumpkin is ridiculous, but given the disagreement and diversity of belief systems in the religious sphere, there will always be circumstances in which another's faith is deemed to be without sensible grounds. If a believer is not obviously flouting any epistemic duty, then regardless of judgements from others, I think they may legitimately claim that their belief is properly basic and rational for them.

4.3. The Unreliability of Testimony Chains

For the proponent of the view that the CSR explanation of religious belief formation undermines the rationality of holding religious beliefs, one particular argument that they might look to utilise is to undercut the reliability of believing reflective beliefs on the testimony of religious authorities particular to your community. This sort of argument would claim, in relation to the CSR of Boyer and Sperber, that the reflective beliefs used to explain and justify the intuitive understanding of religious belief are based on long testimony chains

[53] Of course, the believer in the Great Pumpkin will run into difficulties when the Great Pumpkin doesn't rise from the pumpkin patch on Halloween, perhaps constituting a defeater for their beliefs.

that stretch back to the original formation of reflective beliefs.[54] This original formation would have occurred long ago, at the first point in history when religious belief manifested for humans. The argument proceeds that no-one is able to verify that the original reflective beliefs are reliable, and as such we must conclude that the current reflective beliefs cannot rely on testimony for their justification. *Prima facie* it seems that this kind of argument might cause problems for believing on testimony. Certainly, it is true that the modern believer cannot verify if the original reflective beliefs that begin a long testimony chain are reliable. Does this alone really mean that the modern day believer has no reason to trust in the testimony of the religious scripture or authority? Even if the reliance on testimony involves the implicit belief in the authority being spiritually ordained in some manner, doesn't this belief itself rely on testimony from previous authorities?

As argued in chapter 3, it doesn't seem to be the case that the modern day believer is solely basing their reflective beliefs on the testimony of the religious authority or scripture. Rather it seems as though there are implicit beliefs surrounding the trust of the authority, such as 'Scripture is the word of God', 'The religious authority should be trusted because they have been ordained by a higher power', or 'Religious authorities use their expertise to convey religious truth to the community'. These sorts of beliefs can be rational for the believer in that they are connected in the overall picture of the entire religious belief set to the original intuitive belief that there is a God or higher power of some sort. If that belief can be properly basic for the believer, then the reflective beliefs can be a result of the testimony of an authority, but this authority is trusted via: a) the conditions in which the authority makes the assertion that the believer trusts and utilises as a reflective belief, and b) by the adherence to the implicit beliefs that justify why the religious authority or scripture should be trusted.

[54] Similar argument, but involving different CSR, may be found in Clark, Kelly J. & Rabinowitz, Dani (2011, 75 – 77). 'Knowledge and the Objection from Cognitive Science.' *EPJR.* Akademos Press.

Yet, what does the religious authority base her reflective beliefs on? On the cognitive science account, her reflective beliefs will be specific to the community in which she has grown up (unless, of course, she has converted to a different religion). It might be that she has read all the relevant scripture and is an expert on the tenets of her particular faith. Her religious belief is properly basic and the reflective beliefs that accompany this are influenced by her faith, and build upon her initial religious belief. Although it is certainly the case that she has no way to verify if the original scripture and authorities that form the basis of her reflective beliefs today were reliable or trustworthy, it seems to me she is nevertheless justified despite this fact. In the absence of a religious experience that confers the truth of her intuitive and reflective beliefs to her, the religious authority will be justified in her epistemic position because she does indeed believe that scripture is the word of God, and so that the reflective beliefs she holds are the correct ones. The religious authority, much like the religious believer, will be rational in her beliefs as long as she is not ignoring any doxastic duty that she ought to have paid attention to when considering and forming her reflective beliefs. As such the objection based on the unreliability of long testimony chains is unsuccessful.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this thesis has been to offer a solution to the diversity problem for the rationality of religious beliefs. By utilising the cognitive science of religion explanation for why religious beliefs are common and diverse worldwide, I have shown that the diversity problem can be tackled using advances in the human understanding of the formation and transmission of beliefs. It is probably the case that most religious believers would, at first blush, be wary of the work of Sperber and Boyer in that their naturalistic approach would seem to threaten the rational grounds for holding religious beliefs. Contrary to this intuition, I believe I have successfully provided an account that proves the compatibility of the CSR with the epistemic justification of religious beliefs. The believer need not fear the cognitive science explanation, as regardless of their faith, they may see their beliefs as epistemically permissible.

By moving beyond Plantinga's justification of Christian religious beliefs, I have shown that believers from different faiths can sensibly claim that their particular beliefs are rational, even despite the diversity of contradictory and widely divergent belief sets that exist in opposition to their beliefs. Instead of arbitrarily claiming that one faith is rational and the others are not, it is clear to me that each believer may be on good epistemic footing by holding properly basic intuitive beliefs, with their reflective beliefs gaining justification through testimony and attendant beliefs relating to the special spiritual standing of their chosen religious authority. It would certainly be of great interest to delve further into the empirical validity of the work of Boyer and Sperber in future study, and engage with religious believers to investigate whether the way that they believe and justify those beliefs would be congruent with the account I have outlined. Indeed, if the CSR is correct, then the

religious believer can be confident that they are epistemically justified in the beliefs that they hold.

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