

*What's The Link Between  
Religion and Violence?  
An Exploratory Hypothesis*  
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INTRODUCTION

One night in early 1984, the Rev. Michael Bray, a minister of an independent Lutheran congregation, a man who stands in my own tradition, drove his yellow Honda down a dark street. In the trunk, he had a cinder block to break a window, a can of gas, rags and a box of matches. He was on his way to Dover, Delaware, where he would torch a women's clinic. In his words, by daybreak the next morning, "the only abortion chamber in Dover, Delaware" was put out of the business of "butchering babies." In 1985, Bray was put on trial with two other defendants in the bombing of seven abortion facilities. He was convicted and served prison time until 1989.<sup>1</sup>

In the mid 90's, Rev. Bray again made the national news when he was accused of publishing an underground "how-to" manual called *Army of God*. This publication described in detail various methods for successful acts of religiously motivated sabotage. It was never proven that he wrote the manual. When asked, Bray has neither denied nor claimed authorship.

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Since the mid 90's, Rev. Bray has published a militant Christian newsletter that targets homosexuality, abortion, and the government. He does so from his modest suburban home in Delaware where he shepherds an independent congregation and raises a family. He considers himself a social activist in the tradition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran seminary professor and minister who returned to Nazi Germany in 1939 and helped plot the 1944 assassination attempt on Hitler's life. He compares the moral depravity of the United States with that of Nazi Germany. His religious views come from a particular tradition of Christian thought called "Dominion Theology" where the principal goal of life is to reassert God's dominion over all spheres of life, a view he shares with Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Randall Terry. One specific aspect of this theology is called "Reconstructionism" where the establishment of a theocratic state is regarded as a divine mandate.

#### RELIGION IS ABOUT COPING WITH DEATH

To attempt to explain the connection between religion and violence, I will make the following assumption: I assume that religion is in the business of helping people cope with mortality. It is important to understand what this assumption means and what it does not. It does not mean that religion is *only* in the business of helping people cope with mortality. It does mean that wherever we investigate phenomena associated with religion, we also find in the vicinity, as it were, processes where religion is interpreting death. It also does not mean that all religion copes with death *in the same way*. It does mean that without a relatively coherent and satisfactory explanation of death, religion holds little appeal for potential members. My assumption is that mortality is enough of a global phenomenon that it is frequently on the mind of people and that any religion which claims to be adequate to the complexity of life must offer its membership a compelling interpretation of death if it is to be successful.

When we consider death, we really mean transience at several important levels. First, and most penetratingly, we mean our own personal deaths. Because human beings are endowed with the capacity to think in what cognitive scientists call "decoupled" hypotheses, we can spin what-if scenarios in our heads about the future.<sup>2</sup> That capacity means that without actually facing death

imminently, we can entertain visions of our future demise. Thus, most normally functioning human beings come to realize that the world existed prior to their appearance on the planet and will continue to exist long after their death. Second, we mean by death not only the loss of our personal identity, but also the disappearance in time of all traces of our ever having been here. Just as we know that even pharaohs are swallowed by the sands of the desert, so also we know that our own contributions to the universe during our lifetimes will fall into forgottenness in time. And third, we mean by death, the little deaths present in each moment of time which we cannot hold still. In Romantic literature, for example, the tragedy of a beautiful moment is always the fact that it cannot last and that we cannot return to it. Once it has been experienced, it is gone forever. The devil's deal of a Dr. Faustus has been in the minds of *homo sapiens* at least as long as we have been human beings.

For a religion to gain widespread support it must offer a convincing explanation of death and offer human beings mechanisms for transcending it. By transcending death I mean that religion must offer some larger field of interpretation in which death becomes at most only situationally troublesome, because it is woven into some larger pattern of meaning that grants adherents of that religion emotional and intellectual satisfaction. If a religion cannot achieve this desideratum, then it will inevitably fall into the rubbish heap of cultural history. This claim does not imply, however, that religion must explain mortality in the same way. Whereas Christianity teaches its adherents that death is transcended by promising its followers "eternal life" – which most people regard as the promise that personal identity survives bodily demise – Buddhism teaches its adherents that there is no self to die. Thus, Christianity encourages its membership to hope for something beyond the grave and Buddhism encourages its membership to see death as part of the larger illusions of life. Both explain death's troubling appearance in our consciousness but they transcend it in dramatically different ways.

Whatever else we know about the human brain and the mind that it generates in human beings, we know that it evolved as it has to help us avoid the threat of death and to enhance the survival chances of the organism. We understand the mind as a data processor that sifts salient information from the environment and relays

that information to the body. That processing is not passive but an active winnowing of the immense range of data we might take notice of for those bits of data that are likely to enhance our survival prospects. Threats to our survival are therefore of paramount concern as we probe the larger world. Thus, as we become aware of death, and in particular our own mortality, our brains go to work to seek methods of escape. Cogitation (decoupled meditation) on death triggers our sympathetic nervous system to generate adrenaline in a “fight-or-flight” response. Our limbic system generates reactions in our emotional repertoire. We experience anxiety. In situations where we face particular threats, we take specific precautions to vouchsafe our protection, say, for example, we scamper up a tree when a predator has chased us. By contrast, when we engage in decoupled cogitations on the inevitability of death as such, we discover no such easy solution. Paradoxically, the same mental apparatus that offers us our survival niche as a species also throws up mental conundrums that lead to existential despair. Religion emerges to meet this particular by-product of our mental development. We generate religious ideologies to provide us “an escape route” from the greatest predator we can face.

In his seminal book, *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker argues that human beings are incapable of believing in their own deaths.<sup>3</sup> We certainly have the capacity to be aware of death. We also can come to understand it conceptually. We can even learn to process the emotional turmoil of mortality. But we cannot really come to believe that we will die because a true existential recognition and embrace of that fact overwhelms the human mental apparatus so attuned to survival. Instead, we hypothesize about various ways to escape real death. We formulate “immortality projects,” contrivances which allow us to attach our beings to various mechanisms that slip the noose of mortality. Immortality projects are much broader than religion. They may be artistic endeavors. They may be leaving behind a legacy in scientific inquiry. They may take the form of childbearing. In this context, however, we are especially concerned with the particular form of immortality project called religion.

Religion is a form of immortality project. At the most direct level, it promises connection of the individual to something immortal – be that a God, a force, a consciousness, the ground of

being, or some other non-temporal cosmic edifice. Religion offers explanatory theories intended to situate death within some larger scheme of interpretation such that death's existential burden dissipates.

[R]eligion alone gives hope, because it holds open the dimension of the unknown and the unknowable, the fantastic mystery of creation that the human mind cannot even begin to approach, the possibility of a multidimensionality of spheres of existence, of heavens and possible embodiments that make a mockery of earthly logic – and in doing so, it relieves the absurdity of earthly life, all the impossible limitations and frustrations of living matter.<sup>4</sup>

In this manner religion serves a vital purpose and enhances the survival prospects of the human organism. In other words, religion proves to be adaptive from an evolutionary perspective because it allows us to cope with various consequences of possessing the mental apparatus we do. By venting the anxiety generated by the uncontrollable nature of human mortality before the universe, it renders human life easier to bear. By hypothesizing about powers beyond the knowable, it provides the human organism an escape route from the endless and inescapable feedback loops of mentation on mortality. By processing the emotional turmoil of the loss of loved ones and one's self, it provides human beings with a helpful repository of emotional pain and an important reservoir of emotional optimism. Religion functions as a project at which we can work in life so that death cannot unravel the webs of meaning we spin.

#### RELIGION AND TOTALIZING DISCOURSE: THE BLUFF AND SOCIAL COHESION

Since religion serves such a vital function in the cognitive equilibrium of many individuals, we might suspect that religious adherents would devote an especially high degree of mental energy to the construction and maintenance of their religious edifices. Moreover, they would be constantly on guard to defend this edifice against potential threats. Since the very balance of their mental life depends upon the compelling nature of their religious convictions, they would be engaged in a never-ending battle to approximate cer-

tainty in those convictions. As Clifford Geertz argued in his classic definition of religion, adherents seek to clothe their beliefs in such an “aura of facticity” that those beliefs become for them singularly compelling.<sup>5</sup> The appearance of rival accounts of reality which might undermine the credibility of a particular set of religious convictions is likely to be resisted with all the emotional and intellectual fortitude a community of faith can muster. In this sense, religion seems to possess a built-in inertia that carries it into a totalizing discourse, a dogmatism in the negative sense of that word where the right to claim absolute knowledge safeguarded by divinely inspired revelations is invoked. In other words, religious theories have the tendency to slide into a unique mental niche in the larger economy of human thought processes. Whereas a person may be content to know with a moderate degree of likelihood that the cost of living in central Pennsylvania is a little lower than the national average, a person is far less likely to be content to entertain religious convictions that are merely possible or even probable. Rather, religious convictions deal with ultimate things where a great deal more is at stake. Indeed, in many instances our very sanity before an overwhelming universe is at stake. For example, when a person loses a child in death, the resulting anguish can be so intense that only an absolute or totalizing discourse seems adequate to banish its attacks. Thus, not surprisingly, we find no religious traditions which do not evidence a slide into a totalizing discourse at some point. Because so much is at stake for a religion’s adherents, the temptation to shift from hypothesis to dogmatic certainty seems for many human beings irresistible.

An important analogy from evolutionary psychology might be to compare religious dogmatism to “bluff behavior” or what is sometimes called “self-deception” in evolutionary and social psychology.<sup>6</sup> Empirical studies seem to suggest that human beings have evolved a capacity to deceive themselves when it is in their own self-interest to do so. Among primates, for example, we can observe in males a “bluff charge,” a threat that a male might make when it competes with other males for hierarchical dominance.<sup>7</sup> The male has no intention of fighting but it makes a good show as if it intended to fight. In the complex network of primate social life, bluff behavior evokes a response in intensified perceptive abilities that males might learn to judge potential risk from other males. In

other words, males have developed heightened abilities to distinguish in the behavior of the charging male between a real threat and a bluff. Part of being a social animal is a constant yearning to read in the facial expressions, body language, vocalizations, and other characteristics information critical to effective interaction, a quality that we human beings have inherited along with our primate cousins. In many situations, our own survival and that of other individuals depends upon these social estimations. In response to this “point-counterpoint ratcheting” effect inherent in all bluff behavior, a “brinksmanship” relationship evolves. Evolutionary psychologists hypothesize that something like this scenario is why primates, and human beings, have evolved a capacity to fool themselves. Suppose, for example, that a male developed the capacity to deceive himself about his bluff behavior. That is to say, suppose he became unaware of the difference between his own bluffing and the real thing. The end result is that he would offer a far more convincing bluff display than if he entertained doubts about the adequacy of his performance. This behavior can be witnessed in primates, our nearest non-human relatives. Can this self-deception also be found in human beings? Does it offer us some insight into why religious claims seem to evolve into totalizing discourses when human beings cannot substantiate such views rationally? In fact, self-deception has been found in human beings and with a good deal of frequency, especially in relation to the more radical and fundamentalistic expressions of religion.

Cognitive scientists such as Steven Pinker have documented many instances of what they call confabulations. A confabulation is a coherent but false account of behavior. The most striking example of confabulations comes from clinical work done with patients who have had the corpus callosum, the fibrous neural mass that link our brains’ hemispheres, severed.<sup>8</sup> In situations where extreme and debilitating epilepsy exists, surgeons perform this procedure to eliminate the epilepsy. In patients who undergo such procedures, we see the emergence of two distinct and real agencies in the same person. For example, secretly ask one side of the body to engage in some kind of behavior, and then inquire of the other half why it engaged in that behavior and it will construct a plausible but utterly false explanation. Moreover, the one half of the person, or perhaps we should say one of the now two distinct

personalities within the individual, will believe its confabulation sincerely. Pinker emphasizes that when this phenomenon occurs there appears to be no malfunction in the brain. Rather, the processes that led the “baloney-generator” in the one hemisphere are the same mental processes which operate in our brains all the time. The operation simply becomes clearly apparent because we now are dealing with two distinct and competing personalities. It appears that the mind is often not so much an agency in control of its thoughts as it is a “spin doctor” for them.

Other examples of self-deception in human beings are easy to produce. In controlled experiments, human beings routinely overestimate our own positive attributes. We also tend to overemphasize our own contributions to group projects, ascribing to ourselves moral superiority in excess of what the evidence can support. We are far more likely to attribute our own failures to chance and others’ failures to significant character flaws. In fact, human beings display an incredible ability to change their opinions in whatever manner necessary to maintain a positive self image. We love to feel good about ourselves and we are willing to ignore a wide range of facts which might countermand that impression.

So why would we human beings evolve this capacity to deceive ourselves? The answer seems to be that a sincere belief in our own goodness and superiority helps us to project images of worth to others. That projection is crucial if we are to accomplish success in our courtships and other crucial social interactions. Even if it is not true that we are as good as we think we are, it still assists us in convincing others that we are that good. In the end that helps me get what I want and need for my own flourishing. As psychologists Krebs and Denton argue:

[B]elieving we are better than we are affects the value that others place on us. Faced with a decision about how much to invest in us, other people read us for information about our value. The value we attach to ourselves – our level of confidence and self-esteem, our sense of deservingness – are important sources of information about our worth. If we do not believe in ourselves, who will? Positive illusions induce others to overvalue us.<sup>9</sup>

In the slippage of religious convictions from conjectures about ultimately unknowable things into dogmatic proclamations about ultimate things, elements of self-deception are likely at work which can be nevertheless beneficial to religious adherents. They boost our self-confidence. They encourage us to think of ourselves as special, elect, God's beloved community. Similarly, self-deception also encourages us to regard others as less privileged in the eyes of God, as unclean, sinners, the banished, or the outcast. In the ongoing competition for finite social goods, such beliefs can not only serve important functions in the make-up of the personal mental life of the individual, but also can serve to solidify the individual's social standing. And for the community, belief in its worth relative to other competing groups enhances social cohesion, group action, and willingness to sacrifice for the collective.

The role of self-deception in establishing, maintaining, and policing social relations cannot be underestimated. Our current large-scale and complex social interactions evolved out of the more simple kin groupings of our hunting and gathering forebears. And these capacities derive from even more rudimentary modes of social interaction to be found in less complex social organisms. Most psychologists believe, for example, that human morality is our distinctive permutation on a theme found in non-human species. The more general theme in non-human species is given the name of "group altruism," namely the widespread behavior in animals to sacrifice self-interest for the benefit of other members of the species. In evolutionary theory, such behavior is explained with the use of the idea of "inclusive fitness." The idea is that genetic traits can be transmitted by direct and indirect routes. Genetic traits can be transmitted directly through reproduction. If I live longer, for example, I can breed longer and am more likely to be successful in preserving my genetic lines. A second strategy is to transmit my traits indirectly through the survival of my immediate kinship group. The indirect route implies that under certain circumstances, I might find it necessary to sacrifice myself to guarantee the survival of my family. For example, it might make sense to me to forgo what is in my own self-interest if it means the likely improvement of a kinship group's chances (family) of transmitting its genes to future generations.<sup>10</sup> In other words, if my characteristics are broadly represented in my kinship circle, then it may be to my advantage to invest in the

well-being of that group rather than to invest narrowly in my own self-interest. Such a strategy may offer me better chances of transmitting my genes than other options. In this scenario, the evolved characteristics that have programmed me for such behavior can be said to display “inclusive fitness.”

Part and parcel of such theories of altruism is the assumption that altruism is largely limited to kinship groups and various immediate or face-to-face negotiated alliances. The further we move our attention from close relatives and other people with whom we have entered into mutually beneficial relationships, the more our willingness to exercise moral consideration dissipates. This assumption has been tested empirically over and over again. It has been verified in many animal species and in human behavior as well.<sup>11</sup> Despite what we like to believe about ourselves, moral considerability attenuates the further we direct our attention away from immediate kinship groups and our face-to-face social alliances, those people who are “like us.” One consequence of this insight is the well-documented human tendency and willingness to dehumanize out-groups, that is to say, to deny moral worth and consideration to people who are not like us *because* they are not like us. In other words, human beings have an innate tendency to react with suspicion toward out-groups and to demonize “the other” because of its otherness. This tendency is one of the great challenges to human morality.

Self-deception or bluffing operates at a number of different levels. As we have already seen, it allows us to present to others a more hospitable view of ourselves than if we were brutally frank about our shortcomings. It also places heavy emphasis on human perception abilities to detect self-deception in others. We enhance our chances at survival by learning to tell the difference between “high-quality” people and “duds” who are just pretending to be “high-quality” people. We have a tendency to want to be associated with various social groups that project an image of specialness, election, or moral superiority. We begin to mimic that behavior and engage in a social group’s self-deception of divine election. In the socio-psychological dynamics of religious affiliation, behavior patterns are designed to facilitate processes of “reading” and “being read” for moral and spiritual worth or unworth. Heavily value-laden language is invoked to establish, maintain, and police

boundaries between the sinners and the saved, the clean and the unclean, the faithful and the infidels. Religions need infidels (out-groups) to make membership in their social group (in-group) meaningful. We know we are “faithful” members of religious communities because we are not “them.”<sup>12</sup>

## WHY RELIGION GENERATES VIOLENCE

Against this background analysis of how religion functions in the mental economy of adherents, how it provides foundations for group cohesion, how it serves deeply seated psychological needs for coping with human mortality, and why it evolved in our species in the form that it did, I believe an explanatory hypothesis for the linkage between religion and violence is possible. I suggest that religiously sanctioned violence results from the confluence of the various mechanisms I have just described. Because religion serves the purpose of explaining death, it taps into the deepest fears we human beings can contemplate. Those fears are so intense that any potential inadequacy in our religious coping mechanisms seems deadly and deeply threatening to us. Because our entire beings are rigged for survival, the loss of our lives is the *summum malum*. For this reason, we are eager to absolutize our religious claims. Our capacity for self-deception allows our particular and parochial claims to be inflated into totalizing discourses. Indeed, our evolved psychology seems uniquely designed to encourage it. Add to these qualities an equally strong tendency to deny moral consideration to out-groups. Finally, consider the capacity of individuals to sublimate their interests to kinship and other in-groups. When we link these attributes together, we can see that for religious adherents rival accounts of religious interpretation represent direct threats to some of our most important “immortality projects,” as Becker conceives them. Destabilization of our immortality projects generates so much anxiety that we cannot tolerate the raw fact of our powerlessness before our own mortality. In the face of such anxiety we submerge ourselves yet further into our social groups and further demonize the voice of the other as the sacrilege, heresy, and impurity of the outsider group. The god of our immortality project, now a full-blown totalizing discourse, deserves, even requires, defending against such threats. God is jealous. In this manner a holy crusade against “the other” can be authorized. Indeed, I suggest that it

is because of this process, or something very much like it, that religion and violence are so often linked.

In his insightful study of violence, C. Fred Alford argues in *What Evil Means to Us* that violence is a very effective mechanism to externalize the dread we experience when our normal categories for interpreting life and death are put in jeopardy. “Sadism is the joy of having taken control of the experience of victimhood by inflicting it upon another.”<sup>13</sup> Religious categories such as the soul, God, nirvana, afterlife, messianism, apocalypse, heaven, devil, angels, spirits, and the like, are for many people the only barrier they possess between living with meaning and being pitched into despair. Similarly, many people who do not entertain overt religious symbolism to explain reality as they experience it often have functional equivalents such that if what they “know to be true” is taken away from them, the precariousness of the human condition comes flooding in full force. In other words, religion is not the only “immortality project,” nor the only source of fanaticism. Western rationality, for example, seems no guarantee against these large scale psychological forces, as our current American rhetoric of war against all “evil-doers” implies. Rather, to engage in violent behavior to solidify and defend the premises of our world views taps into many attributes in our cognitive arsenal. Religion is only one, but it is a prominent one. Regardless of any of our particular views about this or that religious tradition, or even religion in general, it is crucial that we all recognize the power of religion to motivate great good, and at the same time to unleash terrible destruction.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I have attempted to develop an explanation of religiously motivated violence that depends upon acknowledged and tested insights from the cognitive sciences. What I have reported here is not very controversial among psychologists although the direction I have taken the literature is unusual. That is to say, such psychological mechanisms as coping strategies for death and grieving, self-deception, and the psychological limits of altruism are all well-documented facts. What is new about what I have presented in this paper is their application to religion and violence.

The claims I make here regarding religion and violence seem to me to be testable hypotheses. It is possible for me to conceive of a

research agenda where the purpose is to test members of religious communities for elements of self-deception. Similarly, it seems to me quite possible to assess quantitatively willingness to justify violence in the name of higher religious causes. Since I am not a practicing research psychologist, I will have to leave that agenda to others.

Furthermore, I hope it is clear that my explanation of religious violence is not a sanctioning of it. To identify the biological, psychological, and social mechanisms which sponsor religious violence is not intended to advance the idea that it is somehow natural, good, or inevitable. Nor is it to argue that religion necessarily supports violence in all instances. Rather, it is to explain why religion has a tendency to generate such violence historically and in the present, why most religions possess fundamentalist branches, why violence “makes sense” to large groups of people, especially when it is in defense of “holy things,” and why it is likely to be an aspect of our future. It is my hope that by better understanding the origins of religious violence, we might be able to conceive of strategies to channel religion’s destructive potential into less violent expressions. I end this essay with a suggestion in that regard.

C. Fred Alford’s already cited study of inmates who have engaged in violent behavior suggests that there are three modes in which human beings can cope with the inevitability of challenges to their world views. Following the work of Thomas Ogden and Melanie Klein, he calls these modes of reaction the autistic-contiguous, the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive “positions.”<sup>14</sup> As the name implies, the autistic-contiguous position is the meltdown position when our conceptual categories are undone. It feels like death as the very constructs that make reality real for us come apart. It generates such anxiety that we are willing to do almost anything to escape it. In fact, it is from such experiences that the willingness to inflict our dread on others through violence arises. The paranoid-schizoid position is the psychological mode we take flight into when we blame others for this dread and want to inflict it back on them, or when we dissociate in order not to have to experience the reality of that dread. The depressive position is the psychological state wherein we find the categorical parameters in which we can effectively process our dread, thus avoiding the temptation to engage in violence. In this frame of reference we learn to suffer in meaningful ways such that this suffering becomes

bearable and perhaps even redemptive without becoming explosive. Alford finds the depressive position woefully underdeveloped in the United States (the place where his study takes place) because the United States lacks convincing cultural resources for these purposes. Many of our cultural resources build upon and fan the flames of our inherited traits of violence, in- and out-group favoritism, and self-deception. The challenge of the future is whether it is possible to construct compelling and satisfying religious symbol systems which can channel our socially undesirable traits into less destructive expressions, which can furnish us with strategies to cope with our mortality in intellectually and emotionally satisfying ways, and which equip us with the capacity to engage our suffering without needing to project it onto others.



#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Juergensmeyer, Mark, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 20-24, 135-136, 149-150.

<sup>2</sup> Boyer, Pascal, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), pp. 129-131.

<sup>3</sup> Becker, Ernest, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pp. 203-204.

<sup>5</sup> Geertz, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

<sup>6</sup> Pinker, Steven, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Viking Press), pp. 260-266

<sup>7</sup> Wrangham, R. W., and D. Peterson, *Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp. 43-45.

<sup>9</sup> Krebs, Dennis, and Kathy Denton, "Social Illusions and Self-Deception: The Evolution of Biases in Person Perception" in *Evolutionary Social Psychology*, edited by Jeffrey A. Simpson and Douglas T. Kenrick. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1997), p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> Buss, David M., *Evolutionary Psychology: The New Science of the Mind* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999), pp. 222-249.

<sup>11</sup> Buss, *ibid*, pp. 253-277; Pinker, *op cit*, pp. 241-268.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas, Mary, *Purity and Danger (Reprint Edition)* (London: Routledge, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> Alford, C. Fred, *What Evil Means to Us* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, pp. 42-45.