King offers a collection of higher-order evidence against religious belief. This higher-order evidence includes:

HE1. at most one system of religious beliefs is right, so most of us are wrong about our religious beliefs
HE2. arguments in favor of God's existence are complex, and so we're likely to make mistakes
HE3. intelligent, well-meaning people disagree about the force of evidence for belief
HE4. there is a lot of epistemic grounds that are relevant to our beliefs that we don't have; we lack reason to be confident that our grounds are representative of the total grounds available.
HE5. had I been born elsewhere or elsewhen, my grounds for belief would be very different

Each of these singly may not make much of a dent in the believer's confidence. Collectively (as HE*), they present good reason to think that I am unjustified in my religious commitments. The argument is:

(1) If S is justified in believing P on grounds G and becomes aware of HE*, then S is not justified in believing P
(2) Many religious believers are justified in their religious beliefs on the basis of certain grounds, and are aware of HE*.
(C) Therefore, many religious believers are not justified in their religious beliefs.

After trying several options that are (to greater and lesser extents) doomed to failure, King offers an analysis using Bayes’ theorem, asking, “Given HE*, how likely is it that T is true?”, where:

(T) There exists an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good God who created the world.

Now one value that is especially relevant for King’s point is Pr(HE*/T), which asks, “How likely is it, if (T) is right, that there would be all manner of doubt and confusion about whether God
exists?” Now if we’re working with a threadbare theism, we might set that value to .05 — suggesting that it is terribly unlikely. But if we have a more sophisticated theism—a theism that includes belief about divine hiddenness and our cognitive limitations in thinking about God—then it’s reasonable to increase the value to .75. After all, Christianity gives us reason to believe that being mired in sin limits our capacities to know and understand God. So if Christianity were right, we’d expect HE*. Consequently, Christian belief is justified even in light of defeaters like HE*.

Now one more take-home point: belief in (T) doesn’t float free of other beliefs about God: the epistemic force of HE* depends on grounds for thinking that Pr(HE*/T) is low. So beliefs about divine hiddenness, as suggested above, motivate high values for Pr(HE*/C) (where (C) is (T) plus beliefs about divine hiddenness).

There is much more in King’s paper to present and discuss, but I want to limit myself here to two issues: one suggesting another piece of higher-order evidence that might be problematic for King and one suggesting a response to the skeptic that King may have overlooked and may prove fruitful.

A worry about Pr(HE*/C)

Now I’ll speak on behalf of the religious skeptic. The worry I have, in brief, is that relying on divine hiddenness to inflate the value of Pr(HE*/C) might lead to another piece of higher-order evidence that would drastically decrease the confidence we have in our religious beliefs. This is because the inclusion of a clause that expects error means that the system of beliefs is one that can never be falsified. In short, we have reason to be suspicious when putative defeaters end up as
The crucial turning point is King’s claim that C (i.e. Christian theism) allows us to set the value of (HE*/C) reasonably high—.75 is his estimate. So what this says is that we have fairly good reason to think that, given Christianity, there will be all manner of doubt and confusion about God. C includes minimally, the propositions God exists and human cognizers are prone to mistakes in their thinking about God. Call the second proposition (M). King suggests that it’s (M) that allowed for a reasonably high value of Pr(HE*/C), but I want to suggest that (M) might end up motivating much lower values for Pr(HE*/C) through an analogous case in clinical psychology.

Consider two different kinds of treatment for psychological illness: Freudian psychotherapy (FP) and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). The aim of FP is to identify unconscious, psychodynamic structures that are underpinning the illness. Once the mechanisms are identified, then work begins on undoing those mechanisms. This happens by means of talking about whatever comes to mind and the therapist asking probing questions to dismantle the structures. A central principle of FP is that problems like anxiety and depression are only symptoms of a deeper conflict. Treating psychological problems means getting at the deeper problem whose genesis is in earlier life experiences. For example, a patient’s depression can emerge from conflicting feelings of love and hate for his parents. Identifying this can take years.

CBT, on the other hand, identifies problematic patterns of behavior and “trains” the patient to follow different lines of thought when maladaptive beliefs and emotions arise. For CBT, the aim is to replace maladaptive and self-destructive thinking with realistic and effective thinking. Here’s a quick example. A woman in the UK thought she emitted an unpleasant odor. Her therapist told her to ride around on the subway with an order of fried fish and french fries
and to observe the reactions of others. This, according to CBT, would allow the woman to see that she wasn’t emitting a bad odor since she would perceive the reactions of people when there really was an unpleasant odor. CBT often works in a matter of weeks or months instead of years.

Advocates of CBT have been quick to point out the speed and cost-effectiveness of their therapy. In defense, advocates of FP argue that we shouldn’t expect easy fixes to deep-rooted psychological problems. Since the problems are so deep-rooted, we should actually expect that fixing them would take a long time.

But here’s the problem. This moves insulates FP from empirical falsification: every time evidence suggests that CBT is superior to FP, FP says “of course we would expect that: the problems are deeper than CBT would expect.” As a result, one has reason to be suspicious of FP: it has built into it a kind of fail-safe to insulate it against empirical falsification—i.e. a way to explain away potential defeaters by suggesting the defeaters were actually anticipated. If the evidence doesn’t go FP’s way, the FP advocate is open to say, “I’m not surprised: getting at deep-rooted psychological mechanisms often leads to dead ends. It’s something we expected.”

The parallel with King’s paper is (hopefully) clear: one of the unattractive features of FP is one of its main principles—psychological problems are rooted deep in the patient’s psyche and any attempt to show that the therapy is ineffective is met with a response that mirrors divine hiddenness. “Of course, we would expect failure; these are deep problems that are hard to get at.” FP thus works in a clause explaining away potential defeaters—in this case, any purported disconfirming evidence. So we can add to HE* something along these lines:

**HE6:** Whenever some system of thought, works in a clause to preserve itself in case of falsification, we have reason to be skeptical of that system of thought; after all, we’re working with a collection of ideas that can never be falsified.
It’s clear how HE6 is related to (M): (M) could be construed as just such an escape clause. But HE* and HE6 give us good reason to set Pr(HE*/C) rather low, which opens up greater space for the religious skeptic.

**Another reply to the skeptic**

King says that theistic beliefs do not float free of our other beliefs. That seems right. But I wonder—why stop there? A fruitful avenue of exploration is to consider a sort of Quinean holism: out beliefs are caught up in a web of other beliefs and, importantly, *practices*—if my experiment doesn’t generate the results I expected, it might be that I’m performing my experiment wrongly.

For the view King develops, it might be that theistic beliefs are connected with other beliefs as well as practices. Consequently, our religious beliefs are epistemically *as well as practically* (or *prudentially*) justified—I’ll use the expression “practice-based justified” as a way of distinguishing between justification of belief by their role in a set of practices versus a pragmatic value, or a kind of usefulness, of endorsing some belief. (So believing that I can get lose five pounds is practically justified but not practice-based justified since—as I’ve described the belief—it is not located within a web of beliefs and practices.). Even if epistemic justification gives out, we might have practice-based justification supporting our beliefs. So religious beliefs are justified by the roles they play in our webs of beliefs and practices.

This doesn’t seem so bad. Consider an example from logic. Classical logic suffers from the problem of *explosion*: a pair of inconsistent premises entails any proposition we like. This, some have argued, is reason to abandon some key claims of classical logic and hop on board
nonclassical systems (e.g. a three-valued logic).

Now consider some theorem of classical logic—pick your favorite. The proof for the theorem justifies it, but the problem of explosion acts as a piece of higher-order evidence against the truth of the theorem: after all it’s evidence suggesting that our logical system that’s used for justifying theorems is faulty. But even though we have higher-order epistemic evidence against the belief in the theorem, belief in the theorem can be justified because it’s caught up in a web of practices as well as beliefs: we live and act, in large part, in ways that validate for ourselves a large number of the rules of classical logic. So: practice-based justification is caught up in a web of belief with epistemic justification, and higher-order evidence undermining the latter doesn’t obviously affect the former. But practice-based justification is, prima facie, part of rational endorsement of some belief. Consequently, practice-based justification is sufficient for endorsement of some belief.

So even if epistemic justification is unavailable for theistic beliefs, one might appeal to practice-based justification as a way to justify those beliefs. In a nutshell, there’s more to what we believe than just what we rationally endorse.