Human Nature as Imago Dei

with Helen De Cruz and Yves De Maeseneer, "The Imago Dei*: Evolutionary and Theological Perspectives*"; Aku Visala, *"*Imago Dei*, Dualism, and Evolution: A Philosophical Defense of the Structural Image of God*"; Olli-Pekka Vainio, *"*Imago Dei *and Human Rationality*"; Johan De Smedt and Helen De Cruz, "The Imago Dei *as a Work in Progress: A Perspective from Paleoanthropology*"; Tom Uytterhoeven, "Co-creating Co-creators? The 'Human Factor' in Education"; Johan De Tavernier, "Morality and Nature: Evolutionary Challenges to Christian Ethics"; and Taede A. Smedes, "Emil Brunner Revisited: On the Cognitive Science of Religion, the Imago Dei, and Revelation."

EMIL BRUNNER REVISITED: ON THE COGNITIVE SCIENCE OF RELIGION, THE *IMAGO DEI*, AND REVELATION

by Taede A. Smedes

Abstract. This article aims at a constructive and argumentative engagement between the cognitive science of religion (CSR) and philosophical and theological reflection on the *imago Dei*. The Swiss theologian Emil Brunner argued that the theological notion that humans were created in the image of God entails that there is a "point of contact" for revelation to occur. This article argues that Brunner's notion resonates quite strongly with the findings of the CSR. The first part will give a short overview of the CSR. The second part deals with Brunner's idea of the *imago Dei* and the "point of contact." The third and final part of the article outlines a model of revelation that is in line with Brunner's thought and the CSR. The aim of this article is to show how the naturalistic methodology of the CSR provides a fertile new perspective on several theological issues and thereby enriches theological reflection.

Keywords: Emil Brunner; cognitive science of religion; *imago Dei*; naturalism; religion naturalized; revelation

RELIGION AFTER THE "NATURALISTIC TURN"

One of the scientific key insights of recent years is that morality and religion have evolutionary roots, that they are deeply embedded within the process of human biological evolution, and can be considered to be its product.

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Morality and religion have often been considered as being an irreducible part of culture, where "culture" was seen as opposed to "nature." This opposition is now considered a construct, a product of (Western) culture. Influenced by the sciences, nowadays a "naturalistic turn" has occurred, so that human beings and their products (including culture and, hence, morality and religion) are presently assumed to be fully part of nature. This assumption has proven quite fruitful for scientific research. One example of such a naturalizing approach (methodologically speaking) is the cognitive science of religion (CSR), which will be introduced in the next section. The CSR tries to explain religion in a naturalistic fashion by uncovering the cognitive mechanisms involved in religious belief. As a methodological research program, it remains agnostic as to whether the religious claims that are believed are themselves true or not.[1]

This article aims at a constructive and argumentative engagement between the CSR and philosophical and theological reflection on the *imago Dei*. The Swiss theologian Emil Brunner argued that the theological notion that humans were created in the image of God entails that there is a "point of contact" for revelation to occur. Brunner was not able to make this "point of contact" more concrete. The aim of this article is to suggest that Brunner's notion resonates quite strongly with the findings of the CSR. The third part of the article will suggest a model of revelation that is in line with Brunner's thought and the CSR. More generally, the aim of this article is to show how the naturalistic methodology of the CSR is not detrimental to theology, but actually provides an interesting new perspective on several theological issues and thereby enriches theological reflection.

The Cognitive Science of Religion

In the past, there have been various attempts that aimed at a naturalistic and evolutionary account of religion. Nowadays, there is an ongoing debate about whether religion is an *adaptation* or a *by-product* of adaptations that evolved to suit other evolutionary functions (Kirkpatrick 2008, 61; see also Visala 2011, 40–50). At this moment, the consensus seems to be, as formulated by Lee Kirkpatrick (2008, 65), that religion is not merely an adaptation "but rather a complex tapestry of byproducts of a diverse collection of psychological mechanisms and cultural evolution."

This complex tapestry is studied by the CSR, a field of study that emerged in the 1990s as a branch of the cognitive sciences. It draws upon experimental results from the cognitive sciences and insights from evolutionary epistemology to explain how culturally recurrent features of human minds and their natural and social environments shape, constrain, and generate religious thought and action. According to the CSR, belief in gods or God "arises through the natural, ordinary operation of human minds in natural ordinary environments" (Barrett 2004, 124). The CSR aims

at "empirically testable, theoretically motivated scientific explanations for why religious thought and actions tend to develop and spread the way they do" (Barrett 2007, 13). In what follows, I will outline what is sometimes called the "standard model" of CSR (Van Slyke 2011). Nowadays, there are many excellent exhaustive overviews of the field (e.g., Boyer 2001; Atran 2002; Barrett 2004; Barrett 2011; Bering 2011; Visala 2011; Barrett 2012) that deal more elaborately with the details and discussions of the following issues.

Empirical studies are consistent with two slightly distinct notions, that humans are born with a kind of "core knowledge" (e.g., Spelke and Kinzler 2007) or have a mental "modular" architecture (Tooby and Cosmides 1992; Cosmides and Tooby 1994; Samuels 2000) that in normal cognitive systems operating in normal human environments "automatically" gives rise to a susceptibility to generate converging intuitions about the world, persons, and gods.[2] Mental modules constitute dispositions or "tools" that in the human species have evolved to perform domain-specific tasks that are activated by stimuli in specific environments. Thus, humans are said to have mental modules, for example, language acquisition, triggered when a child encounters a linguistic environment, and for facial recognition, activated when a newborn baby encounters other faces.

These mental modules yield a set of intuitive beliefs about the world that enable humans to operate efficiently, flexibly, and relatively effortlessly in relation to the world and the agents they encounter. These beliefs constitute what is often called "intuitive" or "folk" knowledge (Sperber 1997; Sperber and Hirschfeld 2004). "Folk" psychology, that is, the intuitive idea that other persons have mental states, affects the way we perceive and interact with intentional agents. It is assumed that because it is relevant for survival, evolution has selected for minds that have the capacity for agency detection, that is, the capacity to efficiently and effortlessly spot agents (e.g., predators) or infer the presence of agents from clues in the environment. However, since from an evolutionary perspective (i.e., survival), it is better to be safe than sorry, these minds tend to identify "false positives," that is, they sometimes detect the presence of agents where there are none. Justin Barrett therefore refers to this capacity as a "*hypersensitive* agency detection device" (HADD). Experiments have shown that when there are hunches that an agent is present, our HADD automatically starts to actively search for agents and will not rest until a satisfactory explanation for the hunch is found. As soon as HADD has settled on an agent, the "theory of mind mechanism" (ToMM) starts ascribing mental states to the identified agent: intentions, feelings, memories, and beliefs that make the agent more intelligible in order to interact with it.

It is hypothesized that HADD and ToMM facilitate the emergence of religious belief, because under certain conditions mental modules may settle for "novel or imaginative candidates, particularly those already believed in

or seriously entertained by others" (Tremlin 2006, 79). The workings of the HADD and ToMM thus may lead to inferences as to the presence and activity of supernatural entities such as gods when it does not find suitable natural candidates that do the explanatory job adequately.

According to the CSR, gods and supernatural beings are *counterintuitive concepts* (Boyer and Ramble 2001; Barrett 2008): they violate our natural expectations (think of an invisible table or mermaids), or an expected property of one ontological category is transferred to a different category (think, e.g., about the originally French fairytale of Puss in Boots). Counterintuitive concepts not only make fairy tales memorable, but also play a large role in religious stories. For example, the Old Testament story of Balaam's talking donkey (Num. 22: 21–35) is appealing because it violates our intuitive expectations about animals (animals do not talk), and it transfers properties belonging to the ontological category of persons (talking, reasoning) to the category of animals. In the New Testament, there are violations of natural expectations in many miracle stories told about Jesus (think about Jesus' act of turning water into wine in John 2: 1–11; and the story of Jesus walking on the sea, that can be found in Matt. 14: 22–27; Mark 6: 45–51, and John 6: 16–21).

It turns out that the most culturally successful concepts are *minimally* counterintuitive concepts (MCIs) with what appears to be a *cognitive optimum* (cf. Boyer 1994, 2001; Barrett 2004, 22). Counterintuitive concepts are interesting and attention grabbing, but most importantly they have a good *inferential potential*: "For MCIs to successfully compete for space in human minds and thus become 'cultural,' they must have the potential to explain, to predict, or to generate interesting stories surrounding them" (Barrett 2004, 25). There thus seems to be a *cognitive constraint* to religious imagination: the most successful god concepts are those that are built on the mental blueprint of persons, because these have tremendous inferential potential. Because they do things, know things, and so on, such agents are the stuff for narratives that can be told and transmitted.

From "Maturationally Natural Religious Cognition" to "Natural Religion"

The CSR thus argues that religious belief arises in humans as a by-product of the normal workings of human minds in ordinary environments. This account differs from the "indoctrination" account one often encounters in atheist manifests (e.g., Dawkins 2006) and that argues that children come to believe in God or gods because they are indoctrinated by their parents and/or the culture they grow up in. Others have shown that Dawkins's indoctrination thesis is too naive; there is always an interaction between culture and evolved cognition (cf. Harris and Koenig 2006; Rottman and Kelemen 2012). Barrett (2012, 185) points out that the indoctrination

thesis hinges on an "evolved gullibility hypothesis," which entails that children believe everything that authority figures (parents, teachers, and so on) tell them. However, as Barrett points out, children seem only "gullible" about things they already have a bias to believe in: "Children's minds are simply more receptive to some ideas over others" (Barrett 2012, 191). And, CSR research seems to show that children's minds seem quite receptive toward religious ideas.

Obviously, the CSR findings do not entail that all humans are religious or that being religious is "biologically determined," that is, inevitable as a part of human development. Thus, Banerjee and Bloom (2013) have argued that Tarzan would probably not believe in God or an afterlife, because he would lack the cultural support. They thus conclude that:

> cognitive biases make humans "receptive" to religious ideas, but do not themselves generate them. (. . .) This might seem surprising, because findings from developmental psychology are often interpreted as providing support for the naturalness of religious ideas. We think that they do – only up to a point, however: they support receptivity, but not generativity. (Bannerjee and Bloom 2013, 7)

Similarly, Barrett (2012, 19–20) argues:

> given a certain kind of biological endowment *and* the ordinary world we are typically born into, we will typically develop certain properties and attributes. These sort of traits – those that are almost inevitable because of our biology plus the regular sorts of environments people grow up in – are natural traits. (. . .) Belief in gods of some sort or other, and maybe a supreme capital G God in particular, may be largely natural in this sense: biology plus ordinary environment, no special cultural conditions required, a predictable expression of our biology's development in a normal environment – but not be biologically determined.

Philosopher of science Robert McCauley (McCauley and Cohen 2010; McCauley 2011) and Justin Barrett (Barrett 2004; Barrett 2012; Barrett forthcoming) have recently argued that the CSR shows that religion is an example of *maturationally natural* cognition, meaning that it "arises in human minds regardless of the peculiarities of cultures" (McCauley 2011, 29). Apparently, the emergence of religious cognition comes just as naturally to humans as walking, talking, and chewing (Barrett 2004; Bloom 2007). Barrett has argued that maturationally natural religious cognition has an analogue in the way natural languages are picked up, which leads Barrett to hypothesize something like "natural religion":

> Cognitive linguists have suggested that our natural cognitive systems inform and constrain our acquisition and use of language. (. . .) Analogously, natural cognition creates receptivity to what might be called *natural religion*. Natural religion is the cultural expression of numerous natural tendencies . . . which encourage belief in gods and related concepts and practices.

> Like natural language, natural religion has an intuitive core supported by naturally occurring nonreflective beliefs. Further, as in language, religious expression that conforms closely to the parameters of natural language will be easily acquired by children (and adults), readily understood and talked about, and will tend to be widespread across individuals and cultures. But also as in language, the anchoring effect of natural religion allows for variability. As formal study of language can increase one's linguistic expression beyond what is simply natural (such as in complex linguistic constructions, extremely large vocabularies, and facility with figurative language), so too religious expression can extend beyond the most basic features of natural religion. Nevertheless, knowing the features of natural religion will help explain why people tend to adopt the religious ideas and practices they do, and to anticipate challenges in changing people's religious thought and action – for instance, through theological instruction. (Barrett 2011, 131)

Barrett furthermore spells out several general features of this "natural religion" (Barrett 2011, 132–33; Barrett 2012, 137–38), and argues how this "natural religion" in different contexts and cultures may lead to more or less elaborate "theologies" using cultural scaffolding (cf. Barrett 2011, 141).

It is, however, important to note that though Barrett's "natural religion" may be the cognitive foundation for a "natural theology" (i.e., the view that knowledge of the existence and the properties of God are derived from observations of the empirical world), it is not to be identified with it. Furthermore, as is the case with "natural language," "natural religion" is supposed to be a cross-cultural invariant phenomenon that is compatible with different religions: "Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Mormonism, Sikhism, and other tribal and world religions are derivations and elaborations of natural religion" (Barrett 2011, 136–37).

Note, finally, that "natural religion" and the notion that religion is "maturationally natural" say nothing about the truth or falsity of specific religious claims or about the truth or falsity of belief in gods or God. The CSR merely describes the cognitive processes that are involved in the way humans think and talk about gods or God. In more philosophical terms, the CSR describes the way our being human *configures* the way we think and talk about God. This configuration can be said to be *transcendental* in the Kantian sense that it puts limits on our imagination, but also makes it possible to talk about (and for believers to experience a personal relationship with) transcendent entities such as gods or God. It limits and informs our concepts of God or gods.

No conclusions about the illusory or real character of belief can be drawn from this without committing the genetic fallacy, but it confirms that we cannot think and talk about God without our human frame of reference. This obviously confirms the "projection thesis" that gained prominence in modernity via the works of Ludwig Feuerbach and Sigmund Freud, though one can respond that the conclusion that *therefore* religion is an

illusion does not automatically follow. Such a claim would need more argumentative scaffolding (see, e.g., Bloom 2009).

However, such argumentative scaffolding could also go in a different direction, that of a constructive engagement with theology. The philosopher of religion Kelly Clark and psychologist Justin Barrett have already suggested that the CSR could be brought into a constructive dialogue with Calvin's idea of a *sensus divinitatis* (Clark and Barrett 2010, 2011). In this article, the aim is to explore the possibility of relating the CSR to the idea that humans are created in the image of God. It is to that idea that we turn next.

Emil Brunner and the *Imago Dei*

The Swiss theologian Emil Brunner is mainly remembered because of his theological wrestle with Karl Barth. In 1934, Brunner published an essay with the title "Natur und Gnade" ("Nature and Grace") in which he pointed out how Karl Barth had misunderstood his views. Barth responded to Brunner's essay with a reply with the simple title "Nein!" ("No!"). The controversy with Barth about natural theology will be left aside here; the main points of interest here are Brunner's ideas concerning the *imago Dei* and the "point of contact" (*Anknüpfungspunkt*) that he outlines in his essay.

In "Nature and Grace," Brunner argues that the notion of the "image of God" in man has to be considered in two ways, one formal and one material (Brunner 1946, 23). While Brunner agrees that the material aspect is completely lost, humans are no longer physically the image of God—"man is a sinner through and through and there is nothing in him which is not defiled by sin" (24)—formally, humans are still carriers of the *imago Dei*. The image of God, according to Brunner, can furthermore be defined by two aspects: "the fact that man is a subject and his responsibility" (23). That humans are subjects entails for Brunner that humans are rational creatures, and that human beings *have words* and the capacity to speak; they can speak, and they understand speech so that God can speak to them, call them. Humans can answer or they can refuse. However, and this is the second aspect, this entails that humans are always *responsible*. The *imago Dei* for Brunner is thus defined in shorthand by the human "capacity for words [*Wortmächtigkeit*] and that of responsibility" (23). This, in Brunner's words, means that humans are persons; they are "in a derived sense that which God is originally" (24).

Brunner even goes further to say that the formal aspect of the *imago Dei* in humans can be said to be "receptivity" in the sense of "the purely formal possibility of [a human being's] being addressed" (31). Being addressed presupposes the capacity for words and responsibility: it presupposes understanding the words and being free to respond to them. This receptivity, the possibility of being addressed, that is entailed by being the

imago Dei, for Brunner entails that the *imago Dei* is the "point of contact" (*Anknüpfungspunkt*) where God's Word addresses human beings: "This point of contact is the formal *imago Dei*, which not even the sinner has lost, the fact that man is man, the *humanitas* in the two meanings defined above: capacity for words and responsibility" (31, emphasis in original).

In other words, for Brunner, the *imago Dei* entails a *human capacity*, moreover, even a *natural capacity* in humans in so far as humans have this capacity naturally; it is what makes them human persons. In so far as humans have the capacity for words and responsibility, they *are* the *imago Dei* in the formal sense, whether they are willing to accept it or not, whether they are religious believers, agnostics, or atheists. It is the responsibility of human beings to choose how they react to this receptivity. They can ignore or reject their responsibility and become atheists. Or they can accept the Word of God, and become believers.

However, for the Protestant theologian Brunner, humans can become guilty by not believing, but they cannot become believers through their own efforts. In Brunner's own words:

> He who does not believe is himself guilty. He who believes knows that it is pure grace. (. . .) The Word of God does not have to create man's capacity for words. He has never lost it, it is the presupposition of his ability to hear the Word of God. But the Word of God itself creates man's ability to believe the Word of God, i.e. the ability to hear it in *such a way* as is only possible in faith. It is evident that the doctrine of *sola gratia* is not in the least endangered by such a doctrine of the point of contact. (32, emphasis in original)

In other words, faith is to believe the Word of God, and this ability to believe is not man's own effort, but is acknowledged as having been created gracefully by the Word of God itself, as "the work and gift of the Holy Spirit" (33). Thus, the human person can reject the Word of God and thereby become guilty, but can never "gain" faith, but only accept faith, once present, as a graceful gift from God. However, in both cases, it is presupposed that humans are created as *imago Dei*; the *imago Dei* is part of the *humanum*.

This entails that the "point of contact" (*Anknüpfungspunkt*) that the formal *imago Dei* is, for Brunner, first of all *ethically* relevant: it is our conscience, our awareness of responsibility and/or guilt (cf. Hubbeling 1956, 38f). From Brunner's theological perspective, human beings, even as sinful creatures and in their rejection of the Word of God, are always in a relationship with God—even if they reject him. Rejection is also a response to being addressed. To be human entails in Brunner's view to be always related to God. In that sense of being always related to God, either positively or negatively, Brunner seems to suggest that humans are always "natural-born believers" unless they decide to be otherwise.

Brunner's "Point of Contact" and Maturationally Natural Religious Cognition

Alister McGrath argues that Brunner's argument implies a specific view of perception, "the recognition of something for what it really is, when that reality, though publicly accessible, possesses a deeper meaning that is veiled or hidden" (McGrath 2008, 163). McGrath continues:

> Both Barth and Brunner hold that this perception is a human act that lies beyond unaided human endeavor, and must therefore be understood as resting on an act of divine grace. Of the two writers, it is clear that it is Brunner who is more open to reflecting on the nature of perception, and its implications for his account of revelation in general, and natural theology in particular. (163)

The critical point, however, is that "the importance of the activity of perception is not accompanied, in either case [i.e., Barth and Brunner], with any concern to explore how human perception takes place empirically" (164). McGrath is clearly not in favor of Barth's notion of revelation that in his view treats humans as bystanders rather than active participants. McGrath is more in favor of Brunner's ideas (cf. 109), even though Brunner "offers such a psychologically naïve account of perception that his analysis of the divine-human interaction in revelation must be judged to be unworkable" (164).

McGrath stresses that "humanity clearly brings *something* to the encounter with the divine, suggesting that a dialogue with psychology would be theologically productive" (164). McGrath points out that:

> However revelation is to be understood, it involves human cognition and perception, which recognize it for what it actually is. Revelation takes place within history, culture, and the natural order, and does not bypass its categories. . . . Revelation may involve the interpretation of historical events, the hearing of the word of God, the reading of Scripture, experience of the presence of God, or reflection on the natural world . . . Yet that process of interpretation and appropriation also includes human perception which simply cannot be eliminated for the sake of theological convenience. (107–08)

Now if that is the case, McGrath goes on, this "strongly suggests that God would appear to the human perceptual system in a manner that allows it to detect, identify, and make sense of God's presence" (109). This means, as a consequence, that revelation is not a simple "from-to" process, but that some kind and degree of reciprocity is to be acknowledged. And, that means that human cognition is not the passive recipient of revelation, but that revelation as communication, interpretation and personal and intersubjective appropriation involves the active participation of the human cognitive system.

Now it seems that the CSR, with its notion that religious cognition is maturationally natural, resonates with such a view. As argued above, the CSR indicates that humans have a natural receptivity for religion. Religious belief arises in humans as a by-product of the normal workings of human minds in ordinary environments. Religious belief rests on cognitive processes that, like walking and talking, are maturationally natural. Human minds are receptive for ideas, stories, events, and practices that spontaneously trigger categories of thought that are inherent to the maturationally "natural religion."

REVELATION AS "ENACTIVE DISCERNMENT"

The foregoing can be summarized as the view of revelation as an *enactive process of discernment*. The term "discernment" is borrowed from McGrath, who in his book on a new natural theology argues for revelation as a process of discernment,

> that is, of adopting a certain way of looking at things, of "seeing" things as they really and actually are, which allows the observer to see the transcendent signified by, or indicated within the natural order. There is no suggestion here of a distinct transcendent realm above, beyond, or even within the natural; rather, the natural is understood at least to disclose, and perhaps even to *become* the transcendent, *when rightly interpreted*. Without a particular hermeneutical framework, the natural remains as it was. There is no epiphany, no transfiguration, without discernment. (McGrath 2008, 73)

The hermeneutical framework first of all may be informed by the theology of a specific religious community (including concepts, stories, and practices). However, the process of discernment also always entails a moment of subjective appropriation. Revelation is never revelation *as such*, but as the one that is addressed, *I acknowledge* it as such—or not, but in that case it cannot be said to be revelation. Thus, discernment cannot take place without the processing of the revelatory event by the human cognitive system. And, this again means that the process of discernment entails a dynamic and enactive process whereby a disclosure of the transcendent in, through and under the immanent takes place through perception that, perhaps via culturally embedded religious ideas, triggers the processes underlying maturationally natural religious cognition. To use Brunner's language, it is through the workings of my maturationally natural religious cognition that I experience that I am being addressed in this event by the transcendent, and invited to respond.

To sum up the above, the model of revelation that is outlined in this article points to *an embedded, embodied, and enactive process of discernment*. Traditionally, revelation has been modeled on a view of perception as an act of passive perception. However, an enactive view models revelation

on the view that perception is a kind of "sensorimotor knowledge" so that "perception is (. . .) not a process in the brain, but a kind of skillful activity on the part of the animal as a whole" (Noë 2004, 2). Knowledge is not gained by simply looking at something, but by interacting with it through physical actions and motor skills. Revelation, in this model, thus is constituted by an interaction between the whole organism including its cognitive system (thus: embodied), and the event that is experienced as being revelatory. An event that is experienced as a divine revelation constitutes a process that takes into account the personal, historical, and cultural situatedness of the subject, and appeals to or builds upon the embodied cognition of which the CSR describes the cognitive mechanisms.

The CSR thus reveals the cognitive mechanisms that are involved in revelatory events. Revelation thus not only involves an event that is experienced as being revelatory, but also involves the subject that interacts with the event. The subject is an embodied entity that experiences the event in a historical and cultural context, but that also has cognitive "skills," "tools," or "modules" that are activated by the event. Through these cognitive "skills" "tools," or "modules" in interaction with the historical and cultural context, the subject experiences the event in a specific way so that it is considered a divine revelation. An event thus is never in itself a revelation. It becomes revelatory through the embedded, embodied and enactive process of discernment that is constitutes an irreducible dynamic between the revelatory event and the subject experiencing the event. The cognitive mechanisms as revealed by the CSR are crucial for this process, since they constitute the "skills," "tools," or "modules" that help the subject (to a large extent unconsciously) to determine whether an event is a revelation or not.

REVELATION AS EMBEDDED, EMBODIED, AND ENACTIVE, AND NATURAL THEOLOGY

The above argument that takes the CSR as a crucial building block of a model of revelation as an embedded, embodied and enactive process of discernment seems to point in the direction of a new natural theology. And, as McGrath writes in his book *The Open Secret*, there may be relations between them, but there is also reason not to conflate the two. Natural theology seems to have a different aim than the enactive model of revelation.

For example, Scott MacDonald has defined "natural theology" in an entry on natural theology in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* as follows: "Natural theology aims at establishing truths or acquiring knowledge about God (or divine matters generally) using only our natural cognitive resources" (quoted in Menssen and Sullivan 2007, 52). According to this definition, natural theology is about truths and knowledge of the divine. Now, of course, some may argue for a propositional view of revelation that also deals with truths and knowledge.

However, the model of embedded, embodied, and enactive revelation outlined above is not first and foremost about truths and knowledge, but it is primarily about the personal experience of *encounter and response*: the revelatory event elicits the awareness that one is addressed in the event, and that one is invited to respond. One could thus say that the revelation is first of all an *ethical* concept: it asks for a response, a decision. If one wants to talk about truths and knowledge in the context of revelation, it is first of all about *personal* truths and *personal* knowledge.[3] How personal truth and knowledge relate to the claims of a specific religion is another matter altogether that goes beyond the limits set to this article.

Revelation as "General" and "Special"

As may be clear by now, the argument so far does not entail any specific claims about any specific religion. As was described above, the "natural religion" that seems to underlie most religious thought does not favor or suggest one single religion. In other words, even if it is possible at all without running into the genetic fallacy, it takes quite some argumentative scaffolding to argue for the truth of a specific religion (e.g., Christianity) on the basis of concepts and principles derived from the CSR. To use theological language, the above argument does not deal with "special revelation" that pertains to a specific religion, but seems to give room for the possibility of "general revelation" or "natural revelation" (cf. Helm [1982] 2004, 13–32). In the context of Christian theology, it is even possible to say that the above argument allows for a "minimal natural revelation" (Helm [1982] 2004, 30f.), in which God manifests Godself in some manner that would, if considered objectively, be sufficiently revelatory for all, but that, because of human sin, now becomes an ambiguous event that is revelatory for some but not for others. This kind of revelation is never enough to sufficiently justify the claims of a specific religion. But, as, for example, Cardinal Newman already argued, such revelation may lead to what he called "natural religion" that means "the knowledge of God, of His Will, and of our duties towards Him" that arise through the "main channels which Nature furnishes for our acquiring this knowledge, viz. our own minds, the voice of mankind, and the course of the world, that is, of human life and human affairs" (Newman [1870] 1979, 303). Newman considered it not a problem to hold that "revealed religion" (i.e., Christianity) can be received by those "whose minds are properly prepared for it; and by being prepared, I mean to denote those who are imbued with the religious opinions and sentiments which I have identified with Natural Religion" (Newman [1870] 1979, 323).

In other words, Newman holds that Christianity as a case of special revelation builds upon the basis of a "natural religion" that seems a case of general revelation. Such a view is entirely compatible with the model

outlined above, but it must be remembered that every religion can make such a claim for special revelation, so that the main differences and incompatibilities between religious claims arise at that level.

REVELATION AND THE "ALTERITY" OF GOD

The American theologian William Placher writes in his book *The Domestication of Transcendence*:

> Human reason cannot figure its way to such a God, since a God we could figure out, a God fitted to the categories of our understanding, would therefore not be transcendent in an appropriately radical sense. We can know the transcendent God not as an object within our intellectual grasp but only as a self-revealing subject, and even our knowledge of divine self-revelation must itself be God's doing. Christian faith finds here confirmation of God's Triune character: We come to know this gracious God not merely in revelation but in self-revelation in Jesus Christ, and we come to trust that we do know God in Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. (Placher 1996, 182)

Placher's view resonates with Barth's reply to Brunner. A God that fits human understanding is not God at all, according to Barth. Revelation can only be radical in the sense that it is Godself who defines the conditions under which revelation takes place. The model of revelation outlined before, and that is in line with the CSR and Brunner's idea of the *imago Dei*, in the eyes of Barth would undoubtedly have to be rejected, since in this model an event to be considered a revelation of God means that the subject has to acknowledge it as revelation, which means that God would be dependent upon the subject's power of critical discernment. In Barth's view, the model of embedded, embodied and enactive discernment would make God dependent upon the cognitive system of a human subject.

Now, Paul Tillich stated about Barth's view that "This idea of God coming to man totally from the outside had great religious power, but I would say that its religious power is disproportional to its philosophical power, to the power of thought. It cannot be carried out in such a way" (Tillich 1967, 173). Tillich thereby sides with Brunner (although he hardly mentions Brunner in his book on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Protestant theology). Yet, he acknowledges the "religious power" of the Barthian reply. And, indeed, there is truth in this reply.

The CSR shows that anthropomorphism—thinking about God in personal and even human terms—is one of the key features of at least the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious god concepts. Underlying many if not most god concepts is the basic ontological category of a person, or as Tremlin (2006, 95) puts it: "The basic design for building a god is based on the mental blueprint for building a person." Barrett (2004, 26) underlines the notion that persons or

Agents have tremendous inferential potential. Agents can cause things to happen, not only be caused. We can explain why things are so by appealing to agents. We can anticipate what an agent might do. We can't anticipate what a rock might do, only what might be done to it. Not surprisingly, then, from space aliens to humanlike animals to cartoon characters to God, intentional agents are the MCIs that people tell stories about, remember, and tell others.

The concept of the Christian God is also rooted in the ontological view of a person that people can relate to, but with a counterintuitive twist: God is not visible, has no tangible body, and has extraordinary powers no human person possesses (omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and so on). Some argue that here we see the HADD and the ToMM in action: God is conceived of as an intentional agent, a being with a mind. This "anthropomorphization thesis," argues that god concepts arise analogous to "seeing faces in the clouds" (cf. Guthrie 1993). Another hypothesis, the "preparedness hypothesis," emphasizes in contrast to the anthropomorphization thesis, that though god concepts often seem anthropomorphic, already children have an intuitive awareness of the crucial differences between attributes of gods compared to humans (e.g., immortality, knowledge, and so on, that is, many of the concepts that theologians often denote with the prefix "omni-" when applied to God). In other words, "early-developing conceptual structures in children used to reason about God are *not* specifically for representing humans, and, in fact, actually facilitate the acquisition and use of many features of God concepts of the Abrahamic monotheisms" (Barrett and Richert 2003, 300; emphasis in original). For now, however, the point is that god concepts are mostly represented and processed by the human mind as representing social agents: "Gods and humans interact as humans interact, and human interaction takes the form of social exchange" (Tremlin 2006, 113). This means, therefore, that god concepts have a strong anthropomorphic bias.

Not surprisingly, anthropomorphism is considered theologically problematic since the argument from projection was made popular by Feuerbach and Freud. Both argued that because god concepts are anthropomorphic, religion is an illusion. However, it is not obvious that this conclusion is entailed by anthropomorphism. Already, the Presocratic philosopher Xenophanes (c.570–c.475 BC), wrote that

the Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black, the Thracians that theirs have light blue eyes and red hair. But if cattle and horses or lions had hands, or were able to draw with their hands and do the works that men can do, horses would draw the forms of the gods like horses, and cattle like cattle, and they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves. (quoted in Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 1983, 169)

However, for Xenophanes, this anthropomorphic way of thinking was no reason to abandon the concept of God altogether. Instead, he argued for a theology in which the idea of "one god, greatest among gods and men, in no way similar to mortals either in body or in thought" (Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 1983, 169) was central. In other words, Xenophanes did not resort to the atheistic conclusion from anthropomorphism and projection that God is an illusion. Instead, he seems to point to a more apophatic way of thinking: God is real, but "in no way similar to mortals either in body or in thought." In the language of today's poststructuralist and phenomenological thought, one could say that Xenophanes already pointed to the *alterity* of the transcendent.

The concept of *alterity* in the words of Saskia Wendel (2007, 228) implies "a relation between transcendence and radical otherness." This relation can be described as follows:

> The idea of transcendence in the theory of alterity emphasizes the radical difference between transcendence and immanence. This strict division between transcendence and immanence implies a number of characteristics of the absoluteness of transcendence: it is radically and absolutely distanced from the immanent and at the same time it is radically absent. Accordingly, it is an absolute mystery and as such it cannot be expressed or known. However, as transcendence and immanence are radically different, transcendence is "beyond" being, beyond man's thinking, feeling and willing. It is "beyond" the immanence of being-in-the-world. It can even be regarded as a "beyond being" in so far as being is still bound to immanence. As the radical opposite of immanence, transcendence can be equated with alterity, such that it is neither a being similar to objects that can be hypostasized to a supreme being, nor is it being. (Wendel 2007, 228–29)

The concept of transcendence as alterity is attractive in so far as it stresses the radical otherness of transcendence and immanence, and so helps to emphasize the unique nature of God's reality—which explains why the Barthian rejection of Brunner's thought has such "religious power."

However, as Wendel goes on to argue, this radical otherness has the nasty habit of being easily characterized in terms of *separateness*: the transcendent is separated from the immanent. And, this gives rise to the philosophical problem that the transcendent "is without any substance, any historicity and cannot or even should not appear in history. . . . It cannot mediate itself in and through the immanent, as transcendence and immanence are not mediated to each other" (Wendel 2007, 230). If the transcendent and the immanent are radically different, it is not clear how both can influence each other, and how the immanent can know about the transcendent; they become incommensurable. Wendel argues that such a view of transcendence as alterity thus easily gives rise to a "residual dualism" of transcendence and immanence, that is problematic especially from a theological perspective (Wendel 2007, 230). This criticism is valid and should be considered. This

is also the point of why Tillich ultimately rejects Barth's view in favor of Brunner's.

Much more could and perhaps should be said here. To summarize, there is a philosophical and theological tension in the model of revelation outlined in this article, which is not to be ignored. This tension arises on the one hand from the anthropomorphic forms of thought that the human cognitive system uses to think and reason about gods or God. On the other hand, there is the theological recognition that anthropomorphism, if taken literally, leads to absurdities that are detrimental to the worthiness of worship that adheres to the Trancendent. As a consequence of all this, it should be acknowledged that within every revelatory experience, there is also always an apophatic moment—that is why McGrath speaks about an "open secret" when referring to natural theology and revelation. There is something irreducibly elusive in every revelatory experience, which is forever beyond human grasping. Caution, modesty, and doubt thus have their proper place within religious and theological discourse.

NOTES

1. Though the CSR is methodologically naturalistic, it must be admitted that many of its proponents are metaphysical naturalists who believe that explaining religion naturalistically entails the illusory character of the beliefs involved (see, e.g., Visala 2011).

2. As mentioned, this article conforms to what is often called the "standard model" of CSR. There are at present many discussions about basic notions of the "standard model" of the CSR, especially surrounding the question of whether or not the mind or the brain has really a modular constitution. This article remains agnostic about this issue, but uses modular language for the sake of convenience. It is to be expected that the "standard model" in due time will be replaced by other concepts. This article reflects the current state of the field.

3. Another and related point is that knowledge gained from natural theology is inferential in character, meaning that natural theology argues for a conclusion based on premises. Personal knowledge from revelation is often direct and noninferential in character.

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