



What Is Natural: Religion, Nonreligion, or Theology? Panel Contribution on the 2024 Boyle Lecture

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This brief panel contribution responds to David Fergusson's 2024 Boyle Lecture that explored the central questions and controversies raised by a consideration of the claim that religion is natural. I pick up and further develop consideration of two aspects of this much larger discussion to offer some pointers for additional reflection on this fascinating cluster of debates. First, I consider the impact on Fergusson's argument of increased attention to the category of "nonreligion," raising the question of whether it might be nonreligion, as opposed to both belief and unbelief, that might be considered natural. Second, I turn from religion to theology, suggesting the importance of considering the naturalness of theology via Paul Tillich's neglected notion of *Grundoffenbarung*.



David Fergusson's 2024 Boyle Lecture expertly explored the central questions and controversies raised by consideration of the claim that religion is natural. In my brief panel contribution, I simply pick up and further develop consideration of two aspects of this much larger discussion. In doing so, I do not intend to express any significant disagreement with Fergusson's analyses, but rather offer what I hope are some helpful pointers for additional reflection on this fascinating cluster of debates.

First, as Fergusson rightly notes, one of the most helpful ways to approach the question of the naturalness of religion is to ask what religion might be if it is not natural. For some—and indeed this is clearly the response with the greatest historical precedent (at least in the Christian tradition)—religion is not natural precisely because it is directly dependent on God and God's self-revelatory activity. Encapsulated by the dictum that there can be “no Christianity without Christ,” on such a view a claim to the naturalness of religion is an affront to the origins and sustenance of religion as a response to the divine gift of God's own self revelation. To claim that religion is natural risks presupposing, in T. F. Torrance's phrase, that there is some kind of natural remainder “behind the back of Jesus”; instead, the Christian religion is what it is in fidelity to God's unveiling and the confidence in God's ongoing presence to history.

For others, by contrast, religion is not said to be natural in as much as it is held to be the constructed—artificial—product of humanity. Religion, according to this view, is as much a part of human culture as the arts and the sciences, and, just like these other conventional phenomena, religion is subject to the same forms of historical or scientific explanation. Whether based on analyses of their common characteristics or, conversely, the cultural diversity of religious beliefs and practices, such explanations tend to endorse a debunking approach that finds the roots of religion in human culture and societies as a superstructure or optional extra to the natural necessities and desires of human existence.

An alternative view Fergusson discusses at length in his Boyle Lecture suggests, largely as a corrective to the cultural accounts of religion, that there is a natural (scientific) basis for religion in human evolution. As Fergusson notes, the claim that religion belongs to us by nature, as much as language or reason, is in itself agnostic about the truth value of religious beliefs and practices, but nonetheless provokes important reflections for both believers and skeptics alike regarding the extent and ways in which religion seems bound up with the natural evolutionary emergence of humans as the sort of creatures we have come to be. In other words, irrespective of whether research in the evolutionary sciences of religion is put to apologetic or antagonistic use, what is striking is that this is a research program that takes seriously the reality of religion. The upsurge of debate surrounding new atheism the rise of work in the evolutionary sciences of religion has not only rekindled interest in Fergusson's question but has also

ensured that an affirmative answer—that religion is indeed natural, albeit in a different sense than traditionally held—is a serious option.

More recently, however, developments in the scientific study of religion and notable demographic shifts in many societies have started to concentrate on a subtly different, whilst related question: “Is nonreligion natural?” The rise of the so-called “nones” draws attention to the seemingly increasing prevalence of those for whom religious affiliation, beliefs, and practices are not so much contested as irrelevant. As Linda Woodhead helpfully clarifies, these non believers are not primarily opposed to religion but are rather indifferent to it: they are neither militant atheists nor are they appropriately classified as the “spiritual but not religious,” for whom the questions and meanings of traditional religions are still of interest, even while rejected in favor of newer or revived forms of “spirituality.” While the methodologies and conceptual tools for the study of “nonreligion” are still being refined and the quantitative data underlying the investigations is—quite naturally—hotly disputed, what does seem clear is that there is a significant (and likely growing) proportion of humanity that is “without religion,” suggesting perhaps that it is nonreligion that is natural.

In some ways, a confirmation of the grand theory of secularization, the claim to the naturalness of nonreligion, affirms both more and less than the kinds of scientific atheism and metaphysical naturalism that had previously occupied the vanguard ranks of the army of cultured despisers of religion. The claim to the naturalness of nonreligion is, in important ways, a more limited claim in that it is precisely non-antagonistic: the nones tend to affirm an inclusive tolerance of religious beliefs and practices, provided these are themselves inclusive and tolerant. Lacking a positive credo, nones are, on the whole, ambivalent towards those who wish to affirm a religious affiliation, on the understanding that religion is a matter of personal choice, like many other characteristics formerly understood as essentialist, such as race, sex, and gender.

At the same time, however, a robust account of nonreligion raises a more significant challenge to those, such as Fergusson, for whom the question of the naturalness of religion ought to remain a valid, if not uncontested, one. “None-ism” is, in important ways, more than simply a novel opponent to religion; instead, the refusal to endorse—or crucially, to oppose—any particular religious affiliation, belief, or practice raises the prospect of a really radical alternative to the whole religious–nonreligious dichotomy. Reminiscent perhaps of Nietzsche’s “last man” (*Letzter Mensch*), the nones may be considered a contemporary realization of the archetypal passive nihilists for whom any form of commitment or positive affirmation is anathema. Indifferent and apathetic, the nones are without political and ideological affiliation as much as they are without metaphysical and ultimate concern, such that the very question of what is natural is itself suspect. If nonreligion is the norm, then it is, to an important

extent, not itself natural: neither the presence nor absence of religion is natural because there is no definable natural state of humanity beyond indifference.

My second discussion point follows from the challenge, as I have presented it, of a robust account of nonreligion for the question of the naturalness of religion. My provocation, in short, is that the cluster of issues Fergusson addresses through the lens of the question “is religion natural?” might more productively be engaged, in a post-religious context, by a further shifting of focus from religion to theology. The question “is theology natural?” asks not about the truth or otherwise of any particular religion, nor indeed the normativity of religion *per se*, but rather is a question about the naturalness or otherwise of theological enquiry. That is to say, to affirm the naturalness of theology is to affirm the legitimacy the horizon of the ultimate for humanity. Rather than restricting—with Karl Barth, for example—theology to an activity of the religious (or anti-religious), the enterprise of natural theology extends the exercise of ultimate concern to even those without any religious affiliation or disaffiliation. Indifference in the face of religion (“none of the above”) is not the same as indifference to the basic theological question of why there is something rather than nothing, and the affirmation of the naturalness of such theologizing stands as an effective response to the otherwise all-pervasive apathy of the Nietzschean last man.

Here we might turn, unexpectedly perhaps, to a reconsideration of the concept of revelation, and more specifically, Paul Tillich’s notion of *Grundoffenbarung*. Difficult to translate adequately into English, Tillich sets up *Grundoffenbarung* alongside what he calls *Heilsoffenbarung* and seeks to draw a dialectical account of a distinction between the specific content of revelation (for example, in the case of Christianity, the saving act of God as Christ) and the contentless revelation of ultimate reality. To put it in decidedly non-Tillichian terms, *Grundoffenbarung* is that “natural revelation” that legitimates the very possibility of theological enquiry *per se* prior to any specific religious beliefs or practices. On this account, theology is natural insofar as the indifference of nonreligion is overcome in the risked venture of an ultimate concern: that inkling, available to us all in one way or another, of the richer naturalism that characterizes the world’s diverse religious and spiritual traditions.

David Fergusson has given us a welcome invitation to continue to reflect on the importance of the question of naturalness in religion and theology and has shown that such reflections take us far beyond the reductive either/or of pious dogmatics versus scientific atheism. To explore whether and in what ways religion might be said to be natural—and by extension the naturalness of theology—is to engage with profound considerations at the heart of the science-and-religion field as we move further into our post-religious, but surely not post-theological, future.

