



Should Theologians Answer the Question "Is Religion Natural?": Panel Contribution on the 2024 Boyle Lecture

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In his 2024 Boyle Lecture, David Fergusson takes up the question "is religion natural?" In response, this panel contribution provides four reasons why theologians should be hesitant to offer answers to this question. Debates on the naturalness of religion are (1) frustrated by intractable disagreements about the definition of key terms, (2) a trap for theologians, (3) often exclusionary to autistic people, and (4) serve no practical purpose. I conclude by conceding that Fergusson's unique combination of deep theological reflection and concrete predictions for the church relieves many of these worries.



I want to thank David Fergusson for this very clear and illuminating discussion of the question “is religion natural?” I have never been a particularly big fan of this question, not because I think its uninteresting, not at all, but because I have often concluded that silence is probably best theological response we can give. Those who will know me may be somewhat surprised to hear this—so, I will give four reasons for this silence shortly.

However, I want to start off by saying that Fergusson has gone some way towards convincing me this is a topic that a theologian can engage with profitably and that the hard work of grappling with the various dimensions of this question is work that, if done well, may yet be worth doing. Let me explain my prior skepticism about engaging this topic.

The first reason, expressed most eloquently and insightfully by both David Fergusson as well as in Fiona Ellis’s response, is the realization that so much in debate depends on the definition of the quite undefinable, key terms. The concepts of “religion” and “natural” are not only difficult, multifaceted, or historically contingent; they are not just open concepts identifiable through examples but not definitions; they are not even just family resemblance terms with fuzzy boundaries, and they are not just invented in modernity and so treated with some measure of suspicion by theologians. The situation, I suggest, is even worse than this. “Nature” and “religion” are what the philosopher W. B. Gallie (1956) called “essentially contested concepts.” “Religion” and “nature” are normative concepts that admit no one authoritative definition, because all parties willingly recognize that there are a variety of seemingly legitimate meanings for these terms *and* agreement cannot be reached through evidence or logical argumentation. Instead, there seems something permanently intractable about disagreements on the proper use of the terms “religion” and “natural.” Further, as Fergusson points out, the way much cognitive science of religion has operationalized the term “religion” to refer almost exclusively to “the weird stuff” is further cause for theological dismay. Such a situation tempts me towards a kind of exasperated reticence on this issue.

The second reason for silence is the lingering feeling that the question “is religion natural?” is something of a trap for the theist. As Ellis outlines, if we answer “no,” then, in an intellectual climate dominated by naturalism, this answer seems to give our colleagues license to dismiss religion as an intellectual indefensible superstition. But, if we answer affirmatively—“yes, religion is natural”—then we risk inviting reductionist claims of explaining away religion as epiphenomenal or something humans will grow out of as we continue to evolve. As Fergusson notes, such conclusions are often presupposed rather than demonstrated. As such, the empirical evidence makes little to no difference to the ultimately metaphysical debate about the veracity of religious beliefs. Fergusson’s lecture aside, theistic explanations for the naturalness of religion relying entirely on divine providence as an explanation seem too deistic and

defensive to garner much theological enthusiasm. Whether answered “yes” or “no,” therefore, responding to the question “is religion natural?” seems to leave the believer in a worse position than with which she started. Again, this situation pushes me towards a more prudent form of silence.

As an aside, it might be of interest to note that not all agnostic naturalistic philosophers have taken a reductionist line in response to the naturalness of religion. In his 2019 book *Religion after Science*, J. L. Schellenberg argues that, in the perspective of deep time, the human brain should be considered woefully immature, and we should expect cognitive mechanisms for divine detection to improve considerably over the next 10,000 years. His plea, mostly aimed at the religious “nones,” is that religion is far more complex a topic than science, and whereas we’ve reached a suitable evolved state for scientific progress, we need to wait another 10,000 years before we should expect to see comparable religious progress. I do not fully agree with this argument, but I offer it as a highly original and creative perspective on this otherwise well-worn topic.

Returning to my reasons for silence, my third reason for hesitance arises out of my current research project on autism and theology. In brief, many of the main theories in cognitive science of religion (CSR), such as the hyper-agency detection device, counter-intuitive concepts, and theory of mind mechanisms, have argued that we know religion manifests through these cognitive mechanisms because autistic people are impaired in these mechanisms and tend to be less religious (see McCauley and Graham 2020, 157–210). And yet, autistic people clearly *are* religious and deeply spiritual. Reasons for lower attendance in institutionalized religion are more likely social, sensory, and linguistic than cognitive or affective. I think that leading theories of CSR have yet to consider autism seriously and holistically, and that, if they do, they will find that, autistic spirituality provides important counterevidence to current thinking and offers new avenues for future research. That is, I remain hesitant to fully endorse contemporary theories in CSR because I worry it stands on shaky foundation of neurotypical normativity that needs to be revised, and I do not know how the field (CSR) will look after it has wrestled with this challenge.

Finally, my fourth reason for reticence is the culmination of the previous three. After the hard work of defending one’s preferred definitions of these essential contested concepts, carefully surveying the empirical evidence and realizing that it makes no substantial difference in apologetic debates, and may stand on ableist foundations, I want to throw my hands in the air and ask what was the point in all this anyway. What is really at stake in the question “is religion natural?” Why should we care?

To this, Fergusson provides an innovative answer: affirming the naturalness of religion allows us to contextualize the apparent decline in traditional, institutional religion in Western liberal democracies to provide both comfort and challenge to traditional churches.

Fergusson does this by, somewhat unusually for theologians, offering a prediction. In fact, it is an empirically testable hypothesis: religion is unlikely to disappear so much as be refracted in the future. The comfort in this prediction is in how it rejects the more pessimistic predictions of the secular narrative. But predictions do not merely comfort, they can also impact and direct contemporary behavior. The challenge then is the implication that churches should attend to, and cultivate engagement with, the places where natural religiosity is manifesting in our local contexts, outside of traditional institutions, rather than decry these as idolatrous—the spirituality of the green movement is one Fergusson points to, another might be the persisting cultural interest in ghosts and seances and the popularity of the religiously saturated horror genre in literature, theatre, music, and film.

Does such advice irresponsibly ignore the plausible connection between the naturalness of religion and John Calvin's description of the human heart as "a perpetual factory of idols" (Calvin 1960, I.11.8, 108)? It need not. Humans are as likely to make idols within traditional institutional religion, which draws on our natural tendencies, as it is to extra-institutional spiritualities. It is for this reason that we perhaps urgently need neurodivergent people, whose natural religiosity manifests differently and so will have different biases, in our churches to help, as Fergusson says, "prevent us from believing too much in the wrong things."

What I appreciate most about Fergusson's lecture is how he links this ultimately very practical and pragmatic challenge for the church to a deeply theological picture of God's grace not fulfilling but surpassing our natural capacities. His prediction does not merely lead to evangelistic opportunism but a theologically rich picture of the God who rushes from his house to meet the prodigal son and whose grace can ambush us as a memory, a longing, or a prayer that utters itself.

References

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