



## Is Religion Natural? Response to David Fergusson

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This response to the 2024 Boyle Lecture takes David Fergusson's lecture "Is Religion Natural?" as a starting point from which to discuss some of the philosophical issues that arise in this context. It raises the question of how we are to think about the limits of the natural, expresses some doubts about the explanatory pretensions of cognitive science of religion, and draws out the implications for the topic at hand, drawing upon an expansive naturalist framework.

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David Fergusson has offered a rich and hugely interesting response to the question of whether religion is natural. He has identified some important methodological themes (What is the best way to approach this question? Is it adequately comprehended in scientific terms?); made explicit the question's relevance for the atheist/theist debate; and made clear that there are obscurities in the very terms of the question—obscurities that should make us hesitate before jumping too quickly to a conclusion. In what follows I want to touch upon all these themes, using my discussion to expand upon some of the central insights of Fergusson's magnificent lecture.

Let me begin by saying something about the significance of the question "is religion natural?" It is of particular significance in the current intellectual climate, for the default position in much (but not all) philosophy and science is that naturalism is true and the only intellectually respectable position. Naturalism is defined negatively as anti-supernaturalism, where this is said to involve an opposition to things like God, gods, souls, and all the other spooky supernatural things taken seriously by the supernaturalist. This leaves us with the suitably sanitized natural realm, which has been shorn of the offending items (Ellis 2014, 8–15; De Caro and Macarthur 2004, 21–35). Understood from this perspective, the question "is x natural?" is appropriately loaded. A negative answer suggests that x is supernatural, spooky, and not to be taken seriously; a positive answer suggests that x can be taken seriously after all. The implication here is that we need to be able to say that religion is natural if we are to take it seriously.

Things are rather more complex than this simple narrative suggests for several reasons. First, it needs to be made clear how the notions of naturalism and the natural are to be understood at a more positive level, that is, once we have made clear what is to be avoided (the supernatural, that is, the spooky). Second, the notion of religion is itself rather difficult to pin down. For example, it can be taken to be synonymous with "the religious" (as when we say that human existence involves a religious dimension or when we talk of a religious person or a religious experience). However, it can also be understood as a social phenomenon, as when we talk of organized religion or following a particular religion or losing one's religion. This is not to deny that the two interpretations can be and often are intertwined. The point is simply that they can be separated too, and, depending upon one's focus, can yield very different questions—Are religious experiences natural? Is it natural for humans to be religious? Are religions, or some religions, natural? Add to this the worry about the very meaning of "natural" and a kind of vertigo begins to descend.

We can begin to get a grip on this vertigo by turning, as Fergusson does, to the cognitive science of religion. This turn is significant for my purposes because one way of addressing the question of what "natural" means at a more positive level is to define it in scientific terms. Thus understood, the natural is

equivalent to the scientific and the question of whether some *x* is natural (and hence respectable) becomes the question of whether it can be comprehended scientifically. There are some inevitable oversimplifications here, but the claim to be explored now is that religion counts as natural to the extent that it can be comprehended in scientific terms, and one significant science in this context is cognitive science. More specifically, the idea is that religion and the religious are, in a sense to be further explained, the products of natural cognitive processes. But what does this mean? Is the idea that religion and the religious can be shown to be mere constructions of human cognition? Or is it that the relevant cognitive processes put us in a position to discern what is really there? These metaphysical questions must surely exceed the limits of the cognitive science of religion alone, although as Fergusson illustrates, there are attempts to vindicate a theistic approach along such lines through the idea of a hyperactive agent detection device—the human mind can discern agential characteristics in things, and this is how we are prompted to believe in God. Yet, this does nothing to resolve the metaphysical question of whether the activation of this natural tendency in a religious context puts us in a position to discern what is really there or whether it is just one more example of the mind’s tendency to spread itself on things. The cognitive scientist who is an atheist will insist upon this latter response.

Where does this leave the question of whether religion is natural? Cognitive science can tell us an awful lot about the cognitive processes without which we should be unable to enjoy religious states of mind and engage meaningfully in religious practices, and, to the extent that this approach is scientifically legitimated, we can say that religion and the religious can be naturalized to this degree at least. However, this level of explanation must remain silent on the question of the truth or falsity of religious experiences or religions and whether we should be theists or atheists. For the resolution of these matters, we need to ascend to a different, non scientific level of explanation, and we must be prepared to also allow that, at a certain limit, explanations themselves must come to an end. We are, after all, operating at the blurry limits of our capacity to comprehend in such contexts, and we can reject this limitation only at the cost of lapsing into idolatry.

Am I denying that religion is natural? Certainly I am if this means no more than that it cannot be comprehended without remainder in scientific terms, and it should hopefully be clear that this is not a rejection of science but a rejection of scientism—the assumption that science is the only respectable measure of reality. So, I am suggesting that there is more to religion (and the religious) than what can be comprehended scientifically—it goes beyond “the natural” in this scientific sense. However, and bearing in mind the seal of intellectual respectability that comes with the “naturalist” label, I see no reason to deny that religion and the religious could be natural in a more expansive sense.

What could this mean? It involves allowing that there is more to the natural than what can be measured scientifically, that this does not preclude the possibility of saying something intelligible and explanatory about the relevant phenomena (there is more to explanation than scientific explanation), and that there will be instances where our explanations just give out. But is this not the point where the supernatural comes into the picture, and with it all the spooky phenomena that the naturalist is desperate to avoid and which religion and the religious surely involve? My considered response to this—as an expansive naturalist—is to challenge this pejorative way of characterizing religious phenomena and to make a plea for a conception of the natural world—and our natural human being—that is broad enough and open-minded enough to accommodate the possibility that, *pace* a certain kind of dualist, we are not, as Williams James (1987, 641) put it, “left outside of the deepest reality in the universe” but “substantially fused into it.” There is a sea of philosophy and theology in this important idea, but it is one that suggests that religion and the religious are the most natural things of all and that they put us in touch with the deepest realities. The atheist will naturally protest that this is way too spooky to be taken seriously, but there are two responses to this. First, it certainly does sound rather spooky if it is a matter of allowing that our hyperactive agent detection devices do, after all, put us in touch with a super-weird being who exists at the deepest recesses of the universe (Nicholas Lash (2009, 39–50) called this “Loch Ness theology.” Second, however, we must challenge the assumption that this is an appropriate model through which to comprehend what it could mean to relate to God and consider the possibility that the supposedly more mundane activities Fergusson details—being decent, living a decent life, loving—are genuine parts of what it means to be truly religious and that it is at this level of interaction that we are “substantially fused” into the deepest reality in the universe.

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## References

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