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Is Religion Natural? Boyle Lecture 2024

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A commitment to religion as natural has commanded widespread support in the history of theology and philosophy. This has often been used apologetically, whether through arguments for religious innatism or from a *consensus gentium*, neither of which now seems plausible. This article, originally delivered as the 2024 Boyle Lecture, explores these issues in conversation with recent work in the cognitive science of religion (CSR), where support can be found for religion as natural to our evolved condition. One upshot of this is that, if we are by nature disposed towards religion, then *pace* the standard secularization thesis, it is unlikely to disappear. Yet, while acknowledging the success of CSR, several theological questions are raised about its explanatory reach. The essay concludes by suggesting where a complementarity of scientific and theological description might lead in this domain.

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Introduction

Despite some recent doubts, the question "is religion natural?" has long been answered in the affirmative. Several early series of Boyle Lectures offered a range of confident arguments for the naturalness of religion. These had an obvious apologetic function in confirming the existence of God, though the effort expended had in part to be explained by rising levels of skepticism and heterodoxy. In 1717–18, John Leng, later Bishop of Norwich, offered three complementary accounts for the rise of religion. These comprised the force of education and tradition, the evidences for design, and the constitution of the human mind. As a cumulative case, this explains the universality of religious belief and practice; the *consensus gentium* can be considered rational. Leng then continues his argument by seeking to refute accounts of atheist societies in the travel literature of his time (Leng 1730; Mills 2021, 119).

Most of the leading theologians of the church have affirmed that religion is natural to our human condition and that its fulfilment in whatever form is our intended end. We reach our goal as human creatures only in right relation to God. "You have made us for yourself," Augustine (1992, 3) writes at the beginning of his *Confessions*, "and our heart is restless until it rests in you." This assumption about the human condition is also evident in classical philosophy, for example in the Stoicism of Cicero. He writes that the contemplation of the heavens gives rise to the sense of a superior power. This faith is constant across the ages and generations of humankind, even as superstitions and fantasies die out. In this way the gods declare their presence to us (Cicero 1972, 125). Even a skeptic like David Hume tended towards the view that human beings were inclined to be religious so that the task was not the abolition but the moderation of religion, purging it of superstition and fanaticism. Hume, it seems, did not envisage a society without religion despite judging its causes to be pathological (Harris 2015, 344). If this is broadly correct, then we should not expect religion steadily to disappear under the conditions of modernity. Instead, it is more likely to be refracted in different ways as its traditional institutional expressions are weakened.

While affirmations of the naturalness of religion could be viewed positively or negatively by theologians—both trends are apparent in the Bible—the prospect of collective indifference to religion does not seem to have been entertained. The apostle Paul writes of universal human religiosity that has become corrupt (Romans 1:19–20), whereas, according to Acts, he suggests that an initially sound if minimal knowledge of God is given from our awareness of the regularity of nature (Acts 14:17). Religion may be distorted and idolatrous in which case it has to be corrected, or religion may provide a bedrock of belief which can be clarified and extended by appeal to divine revelation. Either way, this is a force to be described and understood. John Calvin (1960, 43–47) postulated a *sensus divinitatis* which he took to be an inherent feature of every human society. He

does not rate this highly and claims that we need the "spectacles" of scripture to clarify our vision. Nevertheless, there is something out there that matters. Since then, others have continued to offer modified proposals. Schleiermacher believed that all religion reflected a universal sense of absolute dependence, God being the co-determinant of this feeling (Schleiermacher 2016, 18–27). In the twentieth century, Karl Rahner (1978, 31–34) has suggested something similar in his idea of the unconditioned that informs all human awareness and activity. Life is inherently mysterious in its origin and striving. At the horizon of our consciousness, we are aware of a presence that eludes us. In this striving upwards, God meets us in the event of revelation, thus by grace fulfilling but surpassing our natural capacities. To cite one further example, Wolfhart Pannenberg claims that the trust in what lies beyond us and on which we are dependent normally begins in the relationship of a child to its mother. Later it can quickly lead to an acquired awareness of God as the transcendent source of our existence (Pannenberg 1991, 114–15).

Despite this notable consensus amongst ancient and modern thinkers, there is some ambiguity about the sense of God. Whence does this arise? Cicero seems to elide two notions. Belief in God may be considered ineluctable, as if impressed upon us from the outset, as with believing in the external world and other minds. Alternatively, we might consider it a judgment that we quickly form once we consider the order and majesty of the cosmos. Calvin can also be read either way. In the early modern era, Descartes claimed that the belief in God was innate. Such an idea could only be the imprint of God for how else would we have conceived of an infinite and perfect being? John Locke regarded this as a flimsy notion. We do not have an innate idea of God though we can frame a reasonable notion that is supported by the evidence (Locke 1973, 67–78; Mills 2021). In what follows, I suggest that evolutionary psychology might offer a way of mediating between these innatist and acquisitivist positions.

The mere fact that most or all people have believed in God or the gods does not of course guarantee the veracity of such belief (Meierding 1998). Considered as an argument for God's existence, this is hardly watertight. As Pierre Bayle once noted, neither general tradition nor unanimous consent can place any injunction upon truth (Edwards 1972, 148). Moreover, beliefs about the gods vary considerably. They can't all be true, given some obvious inconsistencies, for example polytheism versus monotheism. The greater the variety uncovered, the less likely that there is any convergence upon a single core set beliefs or practices (De Roover 2014). Instead of a distinct belief in God much of the argument shifted in modernity to the universality of religion in human societies, this functioning in a more capacious manner. Yet, in the modern era we are also faced with many people for whom belief in God has ceased to be the default position. I recall a conversation with a scientist who remarked, "*Your* problem is people like me who just don't get it." This was not

a hostile observation; lacking any inclination towards faith, he could see no need for it. And his suggestion was that this must tell against any claim for a fundamental human need for God. Pascal's "*misère de l'homme sans Dieu*" seems unrepresentative of many in our midst. Perhaps theologians have always been apt to overestimate the extent to which our fellow citizens are preoccupied with the question of God as they go about their daily lives.

Such skeptical musings may be too swift. Most people who have ever lived have practiced some form of faith. We have no trace of a human society that lacked religious expression. This deserves the kind of serious consideration that is often lacking in a secular culture. Since about 85% of the global population continues to adhere in some way to religion, the consensus remains pretty strong. This merits serious scholarly study, though it cannot constitute a sufficient justification of belief. John Stuart Mill dismissed the idea that a consensus in favor of religion could become an argument for its veracity. The facts of religious divergence count against this, and, even more importantly, we should seek for sound evidence rather than merely counting heads (Mill 1969, 441–43).

Nevertheless, in his critique of the *consensus gentium* argument, Mill gestures towards one possible revision. If most people believe in God or the gods, then this might be explained as the result of a benevolent creator so ordering the natural world that in the process of evolution human beings are drawn towards their source and end. As a disposition, it might be explained not merely as a natural phenomenon but one which has a spiritual function and goal. In this way, our natural inclinations can be made consistent with a theological purpose; though neither actually entails the other, the possibility of a complementarity of descriptions remains open. Yet, to the skeptic, this will appear an easy apologetic move that fails to engage a host of salient issues.

Key Terms in the Debate

The key terms require some initial clarification; these are contested and resistant to simple definition. Although the concept of "religion" is often reduced to a set of beliefs or a worldview, scholars have long been aware that a simple essentialist definition will fail to capture the complexity of the phenomena. Religion is as much about what people do in terms of ritual, codes of behavior, forms of social organization, diet, clothing, and devotional practices. To reduce it to its theoretical or speculative content is to distort its wider expressions and embeddedness in communities. Grace Davie (1994) has written about the phenomenon of believing without belonging. She refers to persistent forms of belief in the supernatural, amidst the decline of institutional affiliation, especially in Europe. Yet the converse may also be true as a longstanding feature of religion—belonging without believing. People can practice faith by attending to ritual, devotions practice, and ethical mores even amid some

uncertainty or unclarity about what they actually believe. Steve Bruce refers to this as "secularization from within" yet this seems to presuppose that religion is essentially about holding a peculiar set of beliefs (Bruce 2011, 11–13). Even people within the same close-knit group can believe quite different things or be unsure about how much or exactly what they believe.

Nevertheless, a coherent account of religion will have to say something about its cognitive commitments and how these contribute to emotion and behavior. Agustín Fuentes, an evolutionary anthropologist, has adopted an approach that views beliefs as socially and materially embedded. Religion is the "capacity for belief in the transcendent to establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations," a capacity that he detects in the archaeological record from at least 200,000–300,000 years ago, and co-extensive with other significant developments in tool making, language, and ritual practice (Fuentes 2019, 144–45).

The term "natural" is similarly open-textured. At least, three senses along a spectrum of meaning can be discerned. As animals, we need to eat, walk and sleep. These are natural activities that require little if any instruction. Instinctive or intuitive, we quickly acquire them even before we can speak. Other skills have to be learned though these might also be considered natural, for example speaking one's mother tongue. Activities can be quickly acquired to the extent that they are performed as if by "second nature." Riding a bicycle for example requires some practice but, once mastered in childhood, the skill is likely to remain ingrained until late in life. I am often surprised in Cambridge by how many people who seem in other respects quite frail and elderly can ride a bike without difficulty—I may soon be one of them. Nature can also be thought of teleologically, that is, in terms of what constitutes a fulfilled human life. We are social and rational by nature. This in turn generates a series of capabilities or functions that some philosophers regard as natural and morally significant for the fulfilment of our nature (Nussbaum 2011). To function well we need, for example, health, education, work, and friendship. Disputes inevitably arise over what else to include amongst the capabilities and functions that constitute a fulfilled life, these reflecting rival visions. But religion could be considered by its advocates to be natural in the second and third of these senses. By virtue of our constitution, we are disposed to act and think religiously by habit, though admittedly enculturation into a faith may be a more arduous process than learning one's mother tongue—Dennett (2007, 309) points out that learning a religion is more like reading than talking. And, with many theological traditions, one might hold that the fulfilment of our nature requires entering into a relationship with God, however understood, which imposes meaning, direction, and order upon our lives (Warner 2014).

On this reckoning religion may be affirmed as natural, though this should be distinguished from the idea of a single natural religion. The most sustained defense of this notion was offered by the deists in the early modern period. One

of their standard claims was that we have been constitutionally designed to know God, to intuit our moral duties, and to offer right worship. To this extent, it was a simple moral faith. The historical expressions of religion, according to the standard deist position, had tended to corrupt this natural faith by introducing a variety of particular doctrines, practices and institutional forms. But with some effort, it was judged possible to return to a pared-down natural religion held in common by all people (Byrne 1989). For this reason, divine revelation could offer at best only a "republication" of the truths available to reason. Yet, deism, as a discernible movement, had faltered by the late eighteenth century. First, there was no agreement on the actual content of natural religion. Both maximalist and minimalist interpretations were offered. For example, was the belief in life after death natural or the product only of some traditions? A further challenge arose from the historical study of religion. The more one studied the phenomena, the more the variety of religious forms became apparent (Harrison 1990, 99–129). As the evidence was sifted, assumptions about a common core became increasingly implausible. If monotheism was the natural default setting of religion, then polytheism must be a later corruption. Yet, the empirical evidence for such claims seemed thin, derived largely from a conjectural history based on the early chapters of scripture. In any case, could a natural religion be spiritually satisfying? Something deeper and more engaging was necessary for the human soul. The consequence was that a more emotional pietism flourished, partly as a reaction to an excessively rational approach to faith. The claim that every human being has the same or similar idea of God, i.e., a natural religion, manifestly ignores the evidence of religious diversity. What was then needed was a clearer distinction between religion as natural and a natural religion.

A Secular Narrative

The obvious objection to any claim today for religion as natural, in the sense that language acquisition is natural, is the seeming absence of faith in the lives of many, particularly in western societies. The position of "no religion" is fast becoming the default setting in the UK and elsewhere, with growing numbers of people ticking this box in surveys and censuses—37.2% in the 2021 census for England and Wales, a rise of 12% in a decade, and increasingly the preference of younger citizens. In Scotland, the 2022 figure was even higher at 51.1%. For many, "no religion" has become the assumed norm, as if it is religion that now has to be explained as unnatural, unnecessary, and implausible (Woodhead 2016). This set of assumptions might draw support from two related types of theory. The first is akin to the standard version of the secularization thesis. Under conditions of economic, scientific, and cultural advancement, religion will gradually cease to be of widespread public significance, becoming instead a fringe activity, a private lifestyle choice for the few rather than the many. This in itself is a complex story about the rise of personal autonomy, scientific and technological advance, religious pluralism, and state neutrality. But for many the

decline in religion in western democracies is to be explained by reference to these and other factors. The predictive consequence is that where these conditions obtain, we should expect the public and institutional expressions of religion to diminish. A second theory that informs the aforementioned assumption might be described as an "error theory" about the origin of religion. If religious belief is an irrational delusion then a natural rather than a theological account of its origin is required. An error theory will look at non-theological options for a story of origins. Once this is in place, we will recognize that religious adherence may be the result of some combination of social indoctrination, ancestral inheritance and psychological compulsion. Under the conditions of modernity, however, the autonomous human subject will tend to discard or significantly to modify earlier assumptions and practices around supernatural agency, divine commands, and post-mortem existence. At the very least, a more open mind on such matters is to be encouraged (Dennett 2007, 308–39).

This alliance of sociological and psychological theory can offer support for the default assumption that religion is an outmoded and largely irrelevant form of human activity that is becoming unnatural. If it persists, it can do so harmlessly as a leisure time pursuit. Where religion manifests itself more potently, it should be tamed by education, economic prosperity, and democratic forces. This story, I suspect, is regarded as highly credible by many of our fellow citizens. Yet, despite its prima facie plausibility, there is some internal tension between these types of theory, the sociological and the psychological. If religion is ingrained in human beings by deep evolutionary forces, then its disappearance seems less likely than its refraction. An explanation of religion as "second nature" may prove hard to reconcile with a theory about its disappearance under specified economic and social conditions. Given a persuasive story about the embeddedness of religion in human societies and its meaning-making habits, the primary *explanandum* will no longer be the persistence of religion in some quarters but its absence under specified conditions. What causes such a pervasive natural impulse to be suddenly deactivated? Why are some societies swiftly deviating from patterns that stretch back thousands of millennia? Is religion more likely to evolve in different ways than abruptly to disappear? I shall return to these questions later.

Cognitive Science of Religion

Although the historical expressions of faith do not seem to have been preceded by a simple universal form of religion that can be excavated, the fact that human beings are disposed to believe and act religiously may be natural in important ways. In this context, the most significant recent development in the field has been the emergence of the cognitive science of religion as an established research program—two *Oxford Handbooks* dedicated to the subject have already appeared (Liddle and Shakelford 2016; Barrett 2022). Located within the wider field of "evolutionary psychology," this approach no longer views religion as a

unique and *sui generis* subject requiring a peculiar set of explanations. Instead, evolutionary psychology understands religion with reference to the capacities and dispositions that have evolved with the human brain. No longer to be compartmentalized, religion is an activity that has a similar evolutionary set of explanations to other forms of belief and behavior. Justin Barrett (2021, 19–20) offers the following summary:

> [G]iven a certain kind of biological endowment and the ordinary sort of world we are typically born into, we will typically develop certain properties and attributes. These sorts of traits—those that are almost inevitable because of our biology plus the regular sorts of environments people grew up in—are natural traits. We can leave the "hardwired" talk to electricians.

There are several recurrent explanatory elements in the cognitive science of religion (CSR) though these are assigned a different weighting by theorists. Our cognitive systems come already with capacities that are not culturally acquired—we are naturally equipped for some activities. Although these require initial instruction, they can be quickly learned after which they function intuitively. Robert McCauley (2011, 31–32) describes this in terms of a "maturational naturalness." Unless impeded in some way, we are conditioned to acquire a language in our early years, maybe more than one. Our minds are not blank slates but have various built-in biases. These are inherited as a result of long processes of biological adaptation. "Natural" in this sense does not mean innate. Instead, the concept refers to a set of capacities which under normal conditions will result in beliefs, skills, and practices. In the case of religion, these conditions result in beliefs in supernatural agents, practical responses to these within communities, and a series of rituals through which people orient themselves towards those invisible agencies.

The best-known explanatory element is the hyperactive agent detection device by which we over-attribute intentionality to our environment. This is apparent in other animals—a dog will bark at a sudden noise, for example snow falling off the roof, even when this is not caused by another agent. As a survival mechanism this is useful, particularly when detecting predators. An animal is safer in over-determining agency in its environment, than in under-determination which carries much greater risks. In infants, a capacity to grasp the significance of intentional agency is already apparent. Within several months, a baby can develop what has been called a "naïve physics," a sense of how objects can be moved by pushing and pulling, and how other agents have their own power of movement unlike stationary toys. This puts us on the lookout for agents that are nonhuman and unseen. As this capacity quickly develops, it becomes easy for young children to think about gods and to believe in them (Barrett 2012, 41–42). Related to this is the early ability discerned in children to

use "teleological reasoning." The "why" question is frequently raised. Research indicates that when pressed on why natural objects exist, about half the child respondents said that some*thing* made it. In the case of animals, three-quarters stated that some*one* made them (Barrett 2012, 49). Our natural tendency is to ascribe forms of personal agency to the making of the world and its inhabitants.

Related to this is a second recurrent theme in CSR, namely our capacity to conceive of counterintuitive agency. This involves a grasp of agents who cut across the more familiar categories of classification. Again, experiments with children show how well adapted they are for this sort of activity. They can imagine objects as animate and animals as personal, these possessing characteristics and behaving in ways that transcend their normal categories. This capacity to absorb counter-intuitive information is apparent in the case of religious concepts, for example investing natural objects with unusual powers or conceiving of invisible agents. Pascal Boyer outlines ways in which minimally counter-intuitive ideas (MCIs) are memorable and therefore more easily transmitted amongst people than more difficult and maximally counterintuitive notions. Those that have the most practical advantages will tend to be preserved and developed (Boyer 2001, 155–81; Liddle and Shackelford 2020, 5).

A minimally counterintuitive concept of a powerful supernatural agent with information and intentions can prove useful in organizing one's environment. Religion is closely connected with the expression and enforcement of moral codes. Here CSR theorizing has further traction. Minimal counterintuitive agents become potentially relevant in enforcing ethical norms given their capacity to influence the world through counterintuitive properties (such as invisibility and/or the ability to know human thoughts). These allow them to witness kindness or treachery and subsequently to reward or punish human agents. Because of this connection between MCI agents and morality, beliefs about MCI agents causing fortune and misfortune become intuitively plausible. While human beings may not have a general urge to explain everything in the world around them, they tend to seek explanations for events with significant consequences for their own survival and fitness. Having an explanation of misfortunes such as catastrophic illnesses, famines, and accidents might allow for the averting of such events in the future.

These are amongst the standard explanatory elements of recent work in the cognitive science of religion. No doubt they will continue to be discussed, developed and refined through further research programs. But what they suggest is that religion is "maturationally natural" in the same way that language acquisition can be considered natural. Experiments with children provide strong evidence that our minds have evolved in ways that dispose us to think, act and function individually and communally as religious. This field of study has proved particularly attractive to scholars of comparative religion in offering an explanatory account via human evolution of the more pervasive features of

religion long identified by social anthropologists and historians (Lawson 2016). We cannot find a society that lacked forms of religious expression—the cognitive science of religion can explain this by an evolutionary account of its universality and recurrent features. Religion, as an embedded element of human culture, has been around for over 200,000 years and sets us apart from other animals.

Commentary

In relation to the evolutionary psychology of religion, the recent theological literature remains underdeveloped with only a few scholars hazarding comments (Messer 2023). Others may think it not worth the effort, a reaction which I regard as mistaken. The following queries are offered as a modest contribution.

Is Cognitive Science of Religion Reductionist?

What do we do with these insights? Not surprisingly, the exponents of cognitive science of religion are divided over its theological significance. On one side, Daniel Dennett seems confident that it will provide a useful error-theory to explain why our brains have tended to delude us into believing and acting religiously. Once this is exposed, then the philosophical critique of religion that he favors is reinforced by a reductive account of religion. His use of cognitive psychology is part of a downward explanation in terms of material forces; a crane rather than a sky-hook, it represents a further extension of Darwinian commitments. Other practitioners of cognitive science of religions to share this skepticism, though often it is implicit rather than declared. The subtitle of Pascal Boyer's oft-quoted work *Religion Explained* is "*The human instincts that fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors*." This explanatory claim has some plausibility. The classical projectionist accounts of religion of Feuerbach, Marx and Freud struggled with empirical fit, their speculative quality often being noted. Yet we now have a putative theory rooted in robust scientific research programs and drawing strength from a wider body of work in evolutionary psychology.

But here we must distinguish causes and reasons. Much of the literature appears to lean towards theological skepticism, as if an evolutionary account of the emergence of belief will settle the issue of validity. Explaining becomes explaining away, since the causal factors must undercut any reasons for holding that religious belief might be true. Yet this is largely a question begging exercise. If we begin from a skeptical position, then a psychological theory might explain for us why so many people are gripped by an illusion. But the skeptical position is here presupposed rather than demonstrated. Causes and reasons belong to different frames of reference that are dependent upon the kind of explanation in view. We can tell a plausible causal story about the evolutionary factors that determine the emergence of religious belief in general. But further downstream this doesn't answer the "why" questions about the specific beliefs, devotional habits, and practices that people intentionally pursue (Murray 2009). These

demand evaluation in social scientific, philosophical, theological, and ethical terms. What reasons do people offer in support of them and are these valid? This evaluative exercise attends to a different order of understanding. An evolutionary predisposition towards certain types of belief does not exclude a subsequent exercise in determining their veracity.

One might of course reach a skeptical conclusion on the reasons for belief and then seek to explain its persistence in psychological or other terms. This is an entirely legitimate procedure, but we should be clear that there is still a different type of evaluation alongside evolutionary psychology. On this view, we might see religion as an evolutionary spandrel, an outgrowth of successive survival strategies that have shaped our brains. If we are skeptical about the claims of religion, then this will also function as an explanation for its prevalence, to which is perhaps added the hope that it can be suppressed or dissipated under specific cultural conditions. Paul Bloom claims that religion has no adaptive value for human beings; it lacks the obvious benefits that accrue from holding other sorts of belief about the world. Instead, he regards religion as an evolutionary by-product of pre-existing adaptations (Bloom 2009). As an epiphenomenon it is natural, but without much significance for human flourishing. This in itself is not a reason for rejecting its truth claims, he concedes, though he suggests that as a natural explanation it resists such positive evaluation. In principle, this might be right, but it requires an assumption of a different sort, namely that religion is unreasonable which of course must be a judgment less about psychology and more about theology. Other criteria of assessment need to be employed in this domain. And it remains open to the theist to claim that God might use this evolutionary outcome to dispose human beings towards belief in the supernatural. Thus, Peter Inwagen asks, "Why shouldn't [God] allow those features to be the cause of the thing he wants?— rather as the human designer of a vehicle might use the waste heat from its engine to keep its passengers warm" (van Inwagen 2009, 136).

Much of what takes place inside a religious community is intentional, shaped by tradition, interpretation of authoritative texts, and development of earlier positions. Other forms of description are required—these might be ethnographic, historical, philosophical, and theological. Religion is a multi-disciplinary field of study and should not be reduced to one totalizing theory. The temptation to assume that evolutionary psychology can do all the explanatory work should therefore be resisted. The study of religion is a multi-disciplinary pursuit, not the province of one method only; a plurality of forms of description is to be admitted (Laidlaw 2007; Jenkins 2022).

Barrett gestures towards something akin to a design argument (Barrett 2012). This evolutionary process reflects a divine intention which enables us to know God. Or to put the case more cautiously, what the science teaches is not inconsistent with the hypothesis that this is what God intends. Just as the architecture of our brains equips us to perceive and interact with the

physical world, so we have a capacity to know the spiritual world of invisible and supernatural forces. In this way, CSR can be aligned with Plantinga's reprise of Calvin. "The *sensus divinitatis* is a disposition or set of dispositions to form theistic beliefs in various circumstances, in response to the sorts of conditions and stimuli that trigger the working of this sense of divinity" (Plantinga 2000, 173). Yet Barrett is less inclined to see any convergence upon a single belief or set of beliefs. Our natural religious leanings are to be distinguished from the theologies of institutionalized forms of religion. These work in different ways, often requiring us to adapt, correct, and develop what seems natural in childhood. Natural religion is merely a beginning from which it will be formed and directed by the sources and norms of tradition.

If religion is deeply implicated in making patterns of meaning and providing a lived framework for a wider set of commitments, then its eradication looks less secure. Jonathan Sacks frequently argued for "the persistence of religion" through its capacity to offer meaning beyond the self, to generate a trust in an order that not of our own making, to articulate a sense of responsibility, to evoke compassion, and to sustain communities of trust and friendship (Sacks 1991). Although this involves much more than giving intellectual assent to a worldview, an outline of what this entails theologically might proceed along the following lines. Our natural tendencies towards religious belief and practice develop into a sense of trust and dependence on what lies beyond us. In this outward movement, we encounter a correlative movement of God towards us. This interaction shapes and directs our forms of life. We do not begin with a clear and distinct idea of God and probably cannot attain one, but our naturally evolved religious tendencies may provide the setting for divine disclosure. In this way our nature can be said to find its fulfilment through grace. We reach our telos only through encounter with God, yet the conditions of possibility are established in our evolutionary make-up, especially in those ways in which we are "maturationally natural." Reconfigured in this way, the earlier assumptions of thinkers like Cicero and Calvin retain some plausibility.

Is There Too Narrow a Focus in CSR?

One worry is that these research programs concentrate only on the "weird stuff," with the result that the lives of faithful people are often distorted. By focusing on fairies, ghosts, apparitions and seemingly bizarre practices, the research ignores the more mundane activities that take place within a faith community—sharing meals, holding study groups, praying each day, participating in charitable work, trying to lead a decent life by loving God and one's neighbor. Many people might adhere to faith on account of friendship, loyalty to their family tradition, a conviction that their community is a force for good, and an overriding sense that this adherence generates a meaning and structure otherwise lacking in their lives. Cognitive commitments can be quite minimal here though adherence will struggle in their absence or in the

face of wholescale doubt. But a broader scope may be needed to avoid an overly cognitive approach to religion, though these explanatory elements will continue to have a place. Religion is deeply connected with making meaning out of our lives, rather than merely believing in strange supernatural objects. Patterns of adherence are better captured by Wittgenstein's parallel with tools and pictures for living, than by Russell's analogy with belief in a celestial tea pot orbiting the earth. In this context, Fiona Ellis defends a form of "expansive naturalism" which displays an openness to embedded practices and beliefs of faith (Ellis 2014). Through seeking to develop a pattern, an order, in which we make sense of our world and our place in it, the practice of a faith has both a practical and holistic character. Its broad scope connects with art, science, ethics, and politics. A framework is generated in which people experience, understand, and interact with the natural and social worlds. A sense of the divine is given only in, with, and under the world in forms of "mediated immediacy" (John Baillie 1939, 178–98).

Though cognitive science of religion can broaden its range, some critics have charged it with neglecting the more practical and integrative features of religion. The reductionist account looks more plausible if we misconstrue religion as merely about the "weird stuff." We can overcome superstitious habits of thought, at least in our better moments. Yet the broader scope of religion should make us wary of a narrowing of perspective with the consequence that the dismissal of faith becomes too easy for the skeptic.

Should Theologians Declare Independence?

A more drastic option is simply to dismiss the whole project on theological grounds as showing the error and confusion that surrounds our natural religious inclinations. The cognitive science of religion would then serve the purpose only of showing how unreliable these tendencies are in relation to a genuine knowledge of God. In this context, the program has been dubbed by several authors as the "cognitive psychology of idolatry," given the very different shape of classical theism (Jong et al. 2015). This manoeuvre is an overture to a positive theology that appeals not to nature but to grace. A genuine knowledge of God and of ourselves derives from Christ, Scripture, and the teaching of the church.

Despite its attractions, this disjunction of nature and revelation, and of science and theology may be too forced. The separation implied here between popular religion and classical theism seems to be purchased at the high price of ring fencing an abstract, philosophical form of theism. Since we can learn much about ourselves from the natural and social sciences; it is incumbent upon the theologian to show how this is consistent with the core convictions of faith. Moreover, much of what we find in established religions appears to transpose earlier layers of ritual, bonding, behaviors, and experience; these are not simply discarded. The elements of ancestral religion remain present, albeit in different forms (Pannenberg 1991, 105).

> One reason for claiming that the ancestral immersive forms of religion still underpin doctrinal religions is the fact that most of the elements that are used to bond small-scale communities, and which form part of shamanic or immersive forms of religion, are still present in all the doctrinal religions. These include singing, dancing, synchronized behaviours, the telling of emotionally charged stories, ritual fasting and feasting. (Dunbar, 262–63)

Almost all theologians have seen our nature not to be destroyed but to be transformed by the practice of faith. Rituals, ethical codes, a belief in supernatural agency, and the practice prayer are enduring features of our religious traditions. These are inflected in manifold ways, though there is an obvious elemental continuity that cannot be ignored (Gornandt 2023). Much of this activity now takes places outside of traditional institutional locations. As David Brown has remarked, if ten times as many people outside the church believe in God, then it behooves theologians to pay attention to this phenomenon and not merely to discard it as idolatrous (Brown 2017, 74). A complete disjunction of nature from grace seems impossible; hence, a conversation with evolutionary psychology is well worth having.

Do Theology and Science Share Some "Unnatural" Similarities?

The distinction between natural religion and theology recalls the cautionary remarks that theologians have often made about our natural religious impulses. These require to be scrutinized, sifted, and at times overcome—the verbs that are deployed will signify the degree of modification proposed. Iain McGilchrist represents this in terms of left and right hemispherical activity in the brain (McGilchrist 2021, 1193–304). All the major religions of the world reflect not merely the unchecked impulses of nature but centuries of reflection upon sacred texts, devotional practices, rituals, and moral codes. Shifts in thought and action are evident across space and time. Much of what is taught may be at odds with some of the religious dispositions that evolutionary psychology has described. Examples that are offered include monotheism. This seems not at all obvious from the perspective of childhood tendencies to believe in an array of invisible agencies. Yet it is an axiom of at least the Abrahamic faiths. One might also point to other key theological themes. The unity of the church across space and time may be an ideal that seems at odds with the tendency for religion to define an in-group that excludes outsiders. This might explain in part why factionalism and schism are so rife in Christian history and why theories of universal salvation engender vehement criticism.

The doctrine of justification by grace also cuts across instincts about getting our just deserts. A sense of unfairness is never far away when we learn that the unrighteous are to be rewarded instead of punished, though in our own case this is an injustice of which we are unlikely to complain. Christian people have long felt some sympathy for the resentment of the elder brother upon learning

from the servants that his father has thrown a party to celebrate the return of his waster sibling to the household. And did Martha really get a fair deal when Jesus commended her sister who had failed to help with the dinner? These illustrations expose the ways in which church teaching sometimes confronts our natural instincts, seeking to raise us to a better understanding of God and ourselves. Such teachings are hard and are often resisted in subtle ways. In this respect, theology may be more like science in the contribution it makes to our knowledge. The scientist seeks not to manipulate the world but to understand it through theorizing of an abstract quality. While this has often produced results of stunning practical importance, the drive to understand and explain often requires thinking in counterintuitive ways (Macaulay 2011, 107–10).

The reason for this is that the world is not always the way it seems to us by virtue of our natural cognitive inclinations. Hence the Copernican hypothesis is not how the solar system initially appears. Micro-organisms were discovered in the seventeenth century, but only later were these recognized as the cause of diseases, these seemingly disproportionate to their effects. And, as has often been pointed out, Darwinism has proved difficult for many people owing to its complexity in the face of earlier hypotheses of divine design. How could an organ like the eye evolve incrementally? How could very different species be the products of common ancestral origins? "Science becomes cognitively unnatural because it reliably traffics, usually sooner rather than later, in representations that are *radically counterintuitive*" (McCauley 2011, 107). This applies a fortiori to quantum theory, string theory, and concepts of anti-matter.

There may be something similar happening in theology. In distinguishing our religious instincts from the convictions of longstanding faith traditions, we start to see the importance of theology. As a second-order reflection on what we do in devotion, ritual, prayer, and practice, it applies a critical standard that can variously confirm, contest or correct what is happening inside a community of faith. This task is a continuous one in face of new challenges, cultural shifts and intellectual advances. Religion needs to be saved from its own distortions and pathologies, and from becoming coopted for political and violent purposes. To this end, secular as well as internal criticism is necessary.

Will Faith Persist?

If the claims of evolutionary psychology have some validity, then we need to revisit the standard model of secularization. This predicts that religious adherence will decline irreversibly as societies become better educated, wealthier, more diverse and tolerant, and less capable of enforcing a single religious identity (Bruce 2011). There is some strong evidence for this if we consider the rapid decline in churchgoing in western Europe since the 1960s. But if the aforementioned evolutionary explanations have plausibility, then this thesis will need to be revised in two ways. First, religious decline should be more

cautiously characterized as local and time-bound—secularity may prove to be the exception rather than the rule. A scrutiny of global patterns reveals a complex mosaic of religious affiliation, some of it increasingly strong in societies that are undergoing rapid modernization. And if we consider the history of the UK, we find earlier patterns of decline followed by "fresh expressions" in the form of new movements, revival, and institutional readjustments (Martin 2005).

A second query concerns the likely effect of the decline of institutionalized religion in our own context. Given our natural dispositions, we might expect a manifestation of religious tendencies in different ways. The phenomenon of the "spiritual but not religious" is receiving increasing attention, though whether this offers much in terms of cohesion and commitment is doubted. Much of the green movement has a spiritual dimension with its language of the sacred, its reverence for nature, and its quest for creaturely harmony. Different forms of spiritual awakening make the so-called new atheism of the earlier part of this century now look dated. And merely to dismiss successful adaptations of faith as ways of internalizing secular values or hollowing them out from within seems somewhat contrived (Bruce 2011, 171). As T. S. Eliot averred, a religion is always adapting itself into something that can be believed (Eliot 1940).

The secularization thesis does however characterize changes that have become evident in many western societies. There is little likelihood of a return to an earlier era in which one expression of faith was the default setting for our society. Nevertheless, a sudden heat death of faith followed by an era of indefinite indifference seems an improbable prospect. More likely we will see a plurality of forms marked by what Charles Taylor has called "fragilization" — the fragility of faith in the presence of so many available options, this fragility extending also to forms of atheism and agnosticism. Many people will hover over the borderline between belief and radical doubt. Taylor wagers that faith will persist albeit in new ways since the secular alternatives offer no adequate substitute in our striving for meaning, order, transcendence, transformation, and wholeness (Taylor 2007, 426–37). Where this will lead is hard to predict—prognostications of irreversible decline or a return to the status quo ante are hazardous, but it seems highly unlikely that religion is set to disappear irreversibly here or anywhere else.

Many may find themselves on the borderland country of a half-forgotten faith that can still ambush us, an experience evocatively expressed by Carol Ann Duffy in her poem on "Prayer." If meaning making, a sense of the sacred, and ritual expression continue to shape our lives then the ways we live will reflect something of the inherently religious setting of the human condition. Even in the absence of intellectual clarity and institutional commitment, manifestations of our religious nature can be expected.

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