

Northwestern Review

Volume 1 | Issue 1

Article 4

2016

Christian Faith and the Scientific Explanation of Religion

Donald H. Wacome

Northwestern College - Orange City, wacome@nwcsiowa.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nwcommons.nwcsiowa.edu/northwesternreview>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Philosophy of Science Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wacome, Donald H. (2016) "Christian Faith and the Scientific Explanation of Religion," *Northwestern Review*. Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://nwcommons.nwcsiowa.edu/northwesternreview/vol1/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by NWCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Northwestern Review by an authorized editor of NWCommons. For more information, please contact ggrond@nwcsiowa.edu.

Christian Faith and the Scientific Explanation of Religion

Abstract

The cognitive theory of religion seems to threaten to debunk religion, including Christianity, as irrational. The cognitive theory explains human religiosity as an accident, a mere byproduct, of the interaction of mental mechanisms evolved for other purposes. The threat to religion can be neutralized by finding good reasons for religious beliefs which can be identified independent of the operation of the cognitive mechanisms the theory posits. Christian faith should be understood not as sub-rational belief, but as trust in the God who resurrected Jesus Christ. Our natural religiosity, like our natural morality, has no necessary connection to God, but God finds aspects of it of use in his project of bringing humanity into fellowship with himself. Christian theology contends that the root human problem is not morally bad behavior, but unwillingness to trust God and the ensuing hopeless quest, largely through religiosity, for self-sufficiency and self-justification. God speaks his decisive good word to humankind, his refusal to accept our rejection of him as the last word, by way of religion, where that rejection makes its natural home. In light of this, persons of Christian faith have no reason to look askance on the cognitive theory of religion. That our religious proclivities have a humble, even risible, origin is a discovery we can with due humility embrace.

About the Author

An encounter with Dutch Calvinist philosophy led Dr. Wacome to pursue a master's degree in philosophy and write his thesis in epistemology. He continued his studies at Duke, where he earned a doctorate and explored metaethical theory in his dissertation. Since he started teaching, his interests have focused on the philosophy of the mind and the philosophy of science, particularly their bearing on the relation of scientific naturalism and the Christian faith. Wacome has a strong interest in theology and remains interested in metaethics, as well as political philosophy, particularly in its classical liberal and libertarian manifestations.

Christian Faith and the Scientific Explanation of Religion

by Donald H. Wacome, Ph.D.

Explaining Religion

Contemporary science offers a compelling account of the universe. It explains how the galaxies, stars, and planets arose naturally from the initial singularity. It credibly promises to account for how there came to be living things on the Earth, and it advances a powerful general explanation of how life on this planet adapted and diversified into a host of complex, highly adapted forms. It extends this evolutionary explanation to the human species and offers an explanation of our origins that cannot reasonably be denied. Further, science makes a convincing case that mind and meaning are features of the natural world. It shows us that whatever freedom and responsibility we possess must be consistent with being subject to the causal laws of nature. It plausibly portrays our capacity for moral agency as an adaptation to social life. Science systematically erodes the illusion that human beings are mysterious beings that escape the net of natural explanation and transcend the material world. If there is a last stand for the traditional human self-image, safe above the rising waters of scientific explanation, it is in religion. However, the naturalizing project has turned to religion, seeking to explain it too as a natural phenomenon.

The scientific explanation of morality “puts it in its place,” revealing it not as a grasp of a transcendent reality but as merely human, an adaptation to social life. Contrary as this is to

traditional views of our moral nature, it is on reflection a discovery we can accept with equanimity. The authority and objectivity of morality do not accord with what many have assumed, or at least hoped, but the authority and objectivity it actually possesses suffice to constrain rational self-interest, which is all we should expect of it. What’s right and wrong is not, on the account of morality as a product of natural selection, subjective or relative in ways that much matter to how we live our lives. Further, the scientific account of the origin of our moral nature, and the constraints it places on the nature of moral truth, is one Christians can, and in fact should, welcome.

In naturalizing morality, science deflates some of its pretensions, but it does not support a radical denial of moral truth nor leave us without good reasons to be moral. Science does not debunk morality, undermining its claim to rationality. In contrast, it does threaten to debunk religion, including Christianity, as irrational. This essay sketches a current scientific strategy for explaining human religiosity, demonstrates its potential to debunk religious belief, and asks whether Christians can reasonably and honestly accept this account of the nature and origin of religion, or if we have at last reached a juncture where Christianity and scientific naturalism must part ways.

The Cognitive Theory

This essay focuses on what is arguably the most radically naturalistic explanation available, the *cognitive theory* of religion. This hypothesis is not in the least hospitable to the attempt to soften the blow science delivers to traditional ideas of human nature. The cognitive theory explains human religiosity as an accident, a mere byproduct, of the interaction of mental mechanisms evolved for other purposes.

Religion is a vast, ancient, and diverse phenomenon. We cannot reasonably think there could be a single explanation for the manifold thoughts, feelings, and forms of social and individual behavior that constitute it. The explanatory focus of the cognitive theory is narrow: the tendency of human beings to find plausible the existence of invisible agents, non-human persons who take an interest in certain aspects of human life, and whose actions explain certain kinds of event. Proponents of the cognitive theory identify religious beliefs as beliefs about these unseen agents, their desires, beliefs, intentions and actions. Rituals and other religious activities are attempts to interact with and influence the spirits, gods, demons, and other beings populating the thousands of religions to which human beings adhere.

The cognitive theory relies on the *modularity thesis*, the idea that the mind is, or at least includes, a collection of evolved, specialized information processing systems. A mental module is dedicated to specific computational tasks. It receives a particular type of input data, in some cases from the sense organs, in other cases from other mental modules, processes that information in a particular way, and then outputs a result that can become input to other modules, or efferent signals in the systems that control bodily behavior. Some, but relatively little, of the output of the specialized information processing systems enters conscious awareness as an idea, belief, or emotion. Introspection affords at most minimal access to the modular mental machinery where the contents of consciousness originate.

The mind’s computational modules are adaptations, crafted by natural selection to track and respond to the natural and social environment of our ancestors. In contrast to other hypotheses, the cognitive theory portrays human beings’ disposition for religious experience and belief not as an adaptation, but as the accidental result of the interaction of various mental

modules adapted for other functions. Pascal Boyer, a principal advocate of this deflationary theory, writes:

Religious believers and sceptics generally agree that religion is a dramatic phenomenon that requires a dramatic explanation, either as a spectacular revelation of truth or as a fundamental error of reasoning. Cognitive science and neuroscience suggests a less dramatic but perhaps more empirically grounded picture of religion as a probable, although by no means inevitable by-product of the normal operation of human cognition.¹

Cognitive theorists accord a central role in making the existence of gods or spirits plausible to an *agency detection* mechanism. The mind contains a module that takes sensory information as input and outputs to consciousness the idea that some agent, human or otherwise, lurks in the vicinity. The agency detector is *hair-triggered*, much more likely to be activated when no agent is present—a *false positive*—than to fail to activate when an agent is present—a *false negative*. Walking in the woods at night, one is much more likely to interpret a noise as due to an unseen, possibly threatening, person or animal than to the wind in the trees. False positives can be inconvenient, but a false negative can be fatal. On the assumption that natural selection can produce a mechanism that is reliable, but not infallible, it is no surprise that we are equipped with what Justin L. Barrett describes as a “hypersensitive agency detector.”² As such, its principal function is the detection of predators. We can, of course, evaluate evidence and arrive at a conclusion that overrides the initial automatic response: after the momentary startle response I realize that sound was just the wind. However, when I already have reasons to believe that there are invisible agents in the neighborhood, say because all the people I trust say

¹ Pascal Boyer, “Religious Thought and Behaviour as By-Products of Brain Function,” *Trends in Cognitive Science* 7 (2003): 123.

² Justin L. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 2004), 32-34.

so, this experience reinforces my general belief. But the theory must account for why *they* believe it. Why do people initially believe the unobserved entities are there?

The threshold for accepting unseen agents as explanations of what we observe is low. The hair-triggered agency detection system accounts for my being primed to jump to the conclusion, at least momentarily, that someone unseen is in the vicinity, but this suspicion, typically, is soon either confirmed or discarded. In the absence of further evidence I do not become convinced that someone is there. In contrast, humans persist in believing in gods, ghosts, spirits, still present ancestors, etc. in the absence of empirical confirmation. They remain unseen, yet they are an enduring element of the way humans make sense of the world. For cognitive theorists, part of an explanation is found in the mind’s general thirst for explanation. Human beings have, in Paul Bloom’s words, “a terrible eye for randomness.”³ We are inept at reasoning about the probability of singular events, and we find it unsatisfying that a personally significant pattern is a mere matter of chance. We are disposed to see purpose or intention whether it is there or not. Studies of young children suggest that this is innate. Human beings approach the world implicitly assuming what psychologist Deborah Keleman labels a “promiscuous teleology,” spontaneously explaining what we find in nature as the product of intelligent design.⁴ This tendency is pronounced with respect to events that are personally important, especially misfortune. As with agency detection, here natural selection favors false positives over false negatives: better to have the false belief that my house burning down a second time was no coincidence, when it is, than to believe it was, when there is an arsonist out to get me. The unobserved beings of religion are attractive explanations for significant events

³ Paul Bloom, “Religion Is Natural,” *Developmental Science* 10 (2007): 150.

⁴ Deborah Keleman, “Are Children ‘Intuitive Theists?’ Reasoning about Purpose and Design in Nature,” *Psychological Science* 15 (2004): 295-301.

for which no natural explanation is readily available. Whatever the difficulties of rationally justifying belief in supernatural agents, the mind’s unconscious information processing mechanisms make such beliefs intuitively plausible. Human beings naturally find it obvious that they share their world with supernatural beings because they evolved to find it intelligible. But the religiously relevant intelligibility is typically of particular, personally important events, not of the cosmos as a whole.⁵ In this regard, the theistic religions, with their belief in a creator, are atypical.

Another cognitive system, the *theory of mind* module, plays an important role in the attempt to account for religiosity as a side effect of the operation of human minds. When sensory information activates the agency detector, it in turn activates the theory of mind module, an information processor dedicated to making inferences about what goes on in the minds of other agents, human or otherwise. If my first thought on hearing the noise in the woods is that a predator is there, my second is that it wants to eat me. We do not need to see other agents—animal, human, or divine—to make inferences about their mental states. We spend a great deal of time speculating about and trying to explain the mental states of minds that are not present. The theory of mind module embodies the assumptions of our *folk psychology*, the innate disposition spontaneously to infer beliefs and desires to make sense of observed behavior, and to predict future behavior on the basis of inferred desires and beliefs.⁶

Superficially, the unseen agents of the world’s religions are wildly diverse, yet on closer examination they fall into an unexpectedly narrow range of possibilities. The mind’s

⁵ Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 13.

⁶ See Bertram F. Malle, *How the Mind Explains Behavior: Folk Explanations, Meaning, and Social Interaction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

information processing mechanisms embody implicit assumptions about the world. There is, for instance, a cognitive system for dealing with living things, and the assumptions of *folk biology* are built into it. When sensory input triggers this mechanism, and something is identified as a biological organism, a variety of inferences ensue. Cognitive anthropologist Scott Atran writes:

In every human society, people think about plants and animals in the same special ways. These special ways of thinking, which can be described as "folk biology," are fundamentally different from the ways humans ordinarily think about other things in the world, such as stones, stars, tools or even people.⁷

There is, Atran continues, "...a faculty of the human mind that is innately and uniquely attuned to perceiving and conceptually organizing living kinds."⁸ When a child sees a cat she already knows, in the sense that this assumption is hard-wired into the mental module dedicated to thinking about animals, that it belongs to a species nested within a taxonomic hierarchy, and that each member of that species possesses a hidden causal nature, an essence that accounts for the typical appearance and behavior of animals of that kind. She expects that when a cat gives birth, it will be to more cats, not to animals of other kinds. This innate biological understanding overrides superficial similarities and differences; the child groups a small black puppy with a large white dog, not with a small black kitten. The child takes for granted that the same individual creature can take on a variety of appearances; she has no difficulty believing that the frog was once a tadpole.

Other mental modules are dedicated to identifying and reasoning about inanimate material objects (*folk mechanics, folk physics*), artifacts, tools, and as we saw above, the minds of

⁷ Scott Atran, "Folk Biology and the Anthropology of Science: Cognitive Universals and Cultural Particulars," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 21(1998), pp. 547-569.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 549.

agents (*folk psychology*). Taken together, the evolved modules of the human mind comprise a fine-grained structure of implicit assumptions about the world and its contents: an innate *folk ontology*. Characteristic of the concepts and categories of our folk ontology, in contrast to other categories and concepts, is the wealth of default inferences they sustain and the large number of expectations they generate. These default inferences manifest our innate assumptions about the world and its contents. However, these ontological expectations can be violated, either in reality, as when scientific taxonomy refutes the natural assumption that whales are fish, or in the imagination, when we hear a story about a dog that gave birth to kittens.

The cognitive theorist points to the fate of ideas that violate the expectations embodied in our implicit folk ontology. Ideas that are *counterintuitive* insofar as they violate these categorical expectations capture our attention and tend to be remembered better and longer than those that do not. A dog that gives birth to kittens is attention-grabbing and memorable in ways many other strange ideas are not, say, a dog with a green tail. In contrast to what is merely unusual, ontologically counterintuitive ideas are more likely to be transmitted from person to person and thus to become socially entrenched. The tale of the dog that had kittens is more likely to be told and retold than the story about a green-tailed canine.

However, to be readily remembered, shared, and preserved an idea must be only *minimally* counterintuitive. It violates just one, or at most a few, of the default expectations of an ontological category. In contrast, prodigiously counterintuitive ideas are too hard to remember and impossible to reason about. Something that violates one of the assumptions of a category holds our attention but leaves the rest of its default characteristics in place, so we still draw a variety of inferences about it. When many default assumptions are violated, the natural

inclination to make inferences is stymied. Rather than an arresting idea to dwell on, there is a forgettable list of strange properties. As Barrett points out, “a dog that was made in a factory, gives birth to chickens, can talk to people, is invisible, can read minds, and can walk through walls” is too cumbersome for a good story.⁹ Ideas of things that are minimally counterintuitive invite, rather than discourage, further thought. The concept of a dog that is invisible, but otherwise normal, leaves in place an array of default assumptions about dogs, so we automatically make inferences that follow from its being a dog but compatible with invisibility. We wonder whether other dogs will detect it by smell alone, ask whether its invisibility will facilitate catching cats, or speculate on how people will react to barking that seems to come out of thin air.

The minimally counterintuitive concepts that successfully compete for space in human minds and eventually secure a place in cultural lore are those that have what Barrett calls “good inferential potential.” They activate a variety of mental modules and elicit explanations, predictions, and interesting stories.¹⁰ Contrasting the idea of an invisible person, rich with inferential potential, with the equally counterintuitive idea of an invisible tree, Barrett notes that concepts that activate the theory of mind module are especially good candidates to become widespread. Humans are endowed with highly developed mental machinery specialized for thinking about the minds of other persons. Our ancestors got to be someone’s ancestors because they were expert at quickly making inferences, on the basis of meager data, about the minds of other human beings, and about the minds of the animals they hunted, and which hunted them. Stories of disembodied agents, whether taken as fact or fiction, activate that cognitive machinery

⁹ Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe In God?*, 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

and maximally engage our interest. There is great diversity in the particulars, yet across cultures, minimally counterintuitive ideas, ideas of invisible persons that have minds similar to human minds, are common to human religiosity.

The cognitive theory also accounts for the close connection of religion to morality. Our moral sentiments, judgments, and behavioral dispositions do not originate with the gods, spirits, ancestors, or other bodiless agents of religion. They arise from innate mental mechanisms that are adaptations to social life. However, supernatural persons are conceived as having an interest in the moral quality of human action. Categorizing something as a person activates mental modules for social interaction including those evolved for moral thought and feeling. Divine beings, disembodied and unseen, are well situated to know what humans are up to. A human being cannot be sure whether one is nearby, observing without being observed. Even where a religion makes no theological claim about divine omniscience, the default assumption is that the gods, spirits, or ancestors, not being limited to the perspective of a body, have potentially unlimited access to morally relevant information.¹¹ When someone contemplates a morally forbidden act, but believes that the gods see her even when no human can, normal moral responses are elicited. In the absence of reasons to think otherwise, the default inference will be that the unseen person believes that the act is wrong, does not want her to do it, and will be angry if she does it. Feelings of guilt and fear of retribution readily ensue.

We saw earlier that part of what makes belief in supernatural agents plausible is the strong drive to explain what might otherwise be thought a matter of chance. Supernatural agents provoked by moral infractions plausibly account for otherwise inexplicable misfortunes.

Unexpected good fortune can be explained in an intuitively satisfying way as the result of a

¹¹ Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 156.

supernatural agent rewarding good behavior. Beyond clearly moral considerations lies the general idea that bad befalls people because they have offended some unseen but powerful agent, and that otherwise unexplained good fortune results from having pleased them.

The spirits, demons, gods, ancestors, and so on of religions are persons, yet they lack bodies. Human beings at all times and places readily believe there are minds without bodies. Cognitive theorists explain this as a result of the fact that while we have one cognitive system activated by observed human or animal bodies, and dedicated to reasoning about them, a distinct mental module is specialized for reasoning about the minds associated with those bodies. When we perceive a dead body, the biological organism module registers this and draws the proper inferences: this organism will no longer move, breathe, eat, and so on. However, as an accident of human cognitive architecture, the theory of mind module does not get the news. Because of this encapsulation it continues making inferences about the mind of the deceased organism, producing conscious beliefs about the dead creature’s psychological states. Young children, told a story about a mouse eaten by an alligator, respond correctly to such questions as, “Will the mouse still eat, breathe, run?” Children know that biological functions cease at death. Yet they respond affirmatively to questions like, “Now that the mouse is dead, can it still think and feel?”¹² Human beings are natural born dualists who find intuitively plausible the idea of a bodiless entity having beliefs, desires, and intentions.¹³ Ironically, thanks to this contingent feature of its neural wiring, the human brain finds highly implausible the thought that it is just a brain, and not something immaterial that transcends the body. This facilitates belief in the

¹²Jesse M. Bering and David F. Bjorklund, “The Natural Emergence of Reasoning about the Afterlife as a Developmental Regularity,” *Developmental Psychology* 40 (March 2004): 217-233.

¹³ See Paul Bloom, *Descartes’ Baby: How the Science of Child Development Explains What Makes Us Human* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

supernatural agents of whatever religious culture one is born into, and it helps account for the almost universal belief in life after death and its connection to religion. The same mental mechanisms involved in making us natural dualists make us naturally religious. Pascal Boyer reports, “The connection between notions of supernatural agents and representations about death may take different forms in different human groups, but there is always some connection.”¹⁴ Religions often include some account of what becomes of the soul after death, whether it goes to heaven, hell, moves on to occupy another body, human or otherwise, or simply persists in the neighborhood, now one of the ancestors.

Religion is essentially practical, not theoretical. People do not just believe that the gods exist as the causes of otherwise inexplicable events; they seek to interact with them. Individuals pray, enlisting their aid. Sacrifices, sometimes costly, are made to gain favor. Corporate religious ritual, devised to influence them, characterizes all human cultures. Making anthropological and sociological sense of the multiplicity of forms human religiosity takes as a social reality leads far beyond the narrow, but foundational, project of the cognitive theory. Its focus is the crucial question, “Why do humans so naturally believe in supernatural beings?” In this it is analogous to the evolutionary theory of morality, which leaves still to be explored a vast realm of historically shaped and culturally articulated meanings, while seeking to explain the central fact that human beings have altruistic tendencies.¹⁵ For the most part, human beings confidently believe that divine beings exist because their fellow human beings say they do, and human brains happen to be structured in ways that makes these reports seem eminently reasonable. Intelligent creatures with a different evolutionary history, lacking a trip-wired

¹⁴ Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 204.

¹⁵ Roger Scruton, in *The Face of God* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 1-49, stresses the limitations of evolutionary explanations of morality and religion.

agency detection module, without encapsulated mental modules that produce incommensurable output pertaining to biological and psychological functioning, and without a powerful tendency to prefer an explanation for which there is little evidence to no explanation, would lack the religiosity so deeply entrenched in human nature.

A Debunking Explanation

The cognitive theory is an intriguing hypothesis widely accepted by many researchers.¹⁶ However, it is not a well-confirmed scientific theory, something we cannot reasonably reject.¹⁷ Arguably, the general evolutionary account of the origin of the altruistic dispositions underlying morality approaches this status, but the cognitive theory of religion so far falls short of it. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to regard it as the best scientific attempt to explain why rational human beings so readily believe in the unseen agents that populate religions.¹⁸ Suppose, then, that this explanation of the ubiquitous human disposition to believe in supernatural beings turns out to be correct: Would it render religious belief in general, and Christian belief in particular,

¹⁶Evolutionary psychologist Jesse Bering reports, “...all but a handful of scholars in this area regard religion as an accidental byproduct of our mental evolution.” *The Belief Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Norton, 2011), 6.

¹⁷Critics contend that the theory depends on controversial and unconfirmed hypotheses about the nature, and even the existence, of the mental modules, and that, even if the modules the theory posits exist, it is not confirmed that they produce the religious beliefs they allegedly explain. See, e.g., Russell Powell and Steve Clarke, “Religion as an Evolutionary Byproduct: A Critique of the Standard Model,” *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 63(2012), 457-486.

¹⁸Competing explanations portray religiosity as an adaptation. Typically they invoke *group selection*: religion is a universal feature of human societies because it promotes social cohesion. See, e.g., David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin’s Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Selection* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). Whether selection at various group levels, in contrast to selection at the level of the individual organism or the gene, is more than a rare phenomenon is controversial among evolutionary theorists. The cognitive theory’s unique value lies in its promise plausibly to explain why individual human beings were *initially* prone to believe in entities for which there is at best minimal evidence. It may well be true that if most everyone in a society has particular beliefs and motivations, then that society will enjoy enhanced cohesion, and this will enhance its members’ inclusive fitness. Once this is the case, and perhaps seen to be the case by the members of this society, individual selection can come into play: At the limit, individuals who lack the belief are denied the ability to reproduce by being killed. But we still need to explain why, originally, individuals began to believe something that, prior to becoming socially entrenched, lacks justification and calls for costly behavior.

unreasonable? Were the cognitive theory to become a well-confirmed part of the scientific picture of human nature would we at last encounter a genuine conflict between faith and science?

Scientific inquiry can make beliefs unreasonable by showing that they are false or at least improbable. It can also make a belief unreasonable by revealing its causes. An explanation debunks a belief if it accounts for it in a way that, while not bringing forth evidence that it is false, nonetheless makes it unreasonable by revealing its causes. The fact that would make the belief true, if it is true, plays no role in the explanation of why it is believed. For example, when we discover that someone’s belief that the Red Sox will win the World Series results from wishful thinking, the belief is debunked. It could be true, but a belief caused by the desire for it to be true is not caused by a reliable process, one that *tracks* the truth, causing a belief if, but only if, it is true. Unfortunately, what one wants to be true bears no systematic connection to what is true. When we discover that this is the cause of someone’s belief, we no longer take it seriously. When we realize that our own beliefs are products of wishful thinking, we abandon them.

Does explaining the disposition to religious belief as a byproduct of our cognitive architecture have a similar debunking effect? The bare fact that a belief has a cause does not undermine its rationality. All our beliefs, rational or not, have causal histories. Some mental mechanisms reliably produce true beliefs, and others do not. I believe that the Red Sox won the World Series in 2013. My believing this is, by some complicated route, causally connected with the events of that October that make my belief true. If those events had not occurred, if the Red Sox had not played, or played and lost, then in all probability I would not believe that they won

the series in 2013. Human knowledge is largely a matter of beliefs having reliable causal connections to the world that makes them true.¹⁹

The debunking potential of the cognitive theory is obvious. Minds like ours would more or less inevitably wind up believing in supernatural beings, whether or not such beings happen to exist, whether or not the beliefs happen to be true. Belief in supernatural agents arises as a predictable feature of human nature, but the cognitive mechanisms that produce them do not track the truth.²⁰ Science can explain, e.g., why human beings believe that dogs exist, but this explanation depends on the assumption that there are dogs that causally interact with human beings. Science also purports to explain why human beings believe that gods exist, but this explanation does not depend on the assumption that there are gods that causally interact with human beings. If the explanation succeeds, it does so whether or not the religious beliefs are true.

How serious is this debunking challenge? The analogous challenge, originating in the evolutionary explanation of our moral psychology, does not render moral belief, and the action it motivates, unreasonable. Arguably, what is debunked is the idea that the moral facts are ultimately objective and that they are a source of reasons to act independent of our interests. But the debunking force is limited, for in supplying us with our innate moral sentiments evolution leaves us with reasons to act morally.

¹⁹ Contrary to a well-known argument advanced by C. S. Lewis, among others—see Victor Reppert, *C. S. Lewis’s Dangerous Idea: A Philosophical Defense of Lewis’s Argument from Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003)—the mere fact that a belief has natural causes does not debunk it, but some causal explanations of beliefs do impugn their rationality.

²⁰ Exchanging the cognitive theory for an evolutionary adaptationist explanation would not solve this problem. Nor would giving up on evolutionary explanation altogether and retreating to earlier explanatory attempts that invoke the social function of religion (e.g., Durkheim, Marx) or individual psychology (Feuerbach, Freud). None of these explanations requires religious beliefs to be true and thus all threaten to debunk the beliefs they explain.

Perhaps the scientific threat to the reasonableness of religious belief and behavior can also be contained. Barrett, a proponent of the cognitive theory, writes, “...identifying that a belief has a natural cognitive basis does not bear upon whether it is true, but may justify holding such a belief to be true until sufficient reasons to the contrary arise.”²¹ Beliefs we are innately disposed to have are, even when we cannot bring forth evidence for them, “innocent until proved guilty.”²² Barrett’s point is perfectly sensible. The demand that *every* belief must be justified by appeal to other beliefs in order to be reasonable is itself unreasonable. We cannot go on forever producing reasons to believe what we believe. There can be no infinite regress of reasons for reasons for reasons... If there is anything we reasonably believe, there must be something it is reasonable to believe even though we cannot supply reasons to justify believing it. Some beliefs must be, as some epistemologists put it, *properly basic*. What types of belief are good candidates for being reasonable without justification? If someone believes something that on reflection strikes her as patently obvious, and she knows of no good reason to doubt it, she has a good candidate for a properly basic belief. Most human beings regard the existence of some kind of divine being as obvious. When they give the matter serious thought, they persist in this conviction even if they cannot come up with good reasons for the belief. Assuming that they know of no good reason to suspect that the religious belief is false, why not regard it as a plausible candidate for something that it is reasonable to believe without need for justification? Why not agree with Barrett that religious belief is innocent until proved guilty? We should. But doing so does not overcome the debunking challenge. Finding evidence that a belief is false is not the only way for it to lose its innocence. Discovering that those who believe it would do so

²¹ Justin L. Barrett, *Cognitive Science, Religion and Theology: From Human Minds to Divine Minds* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2011), 108.

²² *Ibid.*

whether or not it happens to be true is also proof of guilt. It is not proof that the belief is false, but that is not the issue here. What is at issue is whether it is reasonable. At face value, successful scientific explanation of a belief that makes no reference to what would make it true indicates that it is not reasonable, not a belief that one would have if, but only if, it is true. It is revealed as something we would believe whether or not it happens to be true.

Debunking Deflected

This debunking potential is narrowly focused. Whatever force it has, it applies only to instances of the belief caused by the suspect mechanism, not to the belief as such. Consider an explanation of how someone acquired religious belief. There is a slave who, as he reaches adulthood, discovers that his master, an agnostic who could not care less whether God exists, subjects his slaves to Christian teaching from childhood. His cynical intent is to make them compliant workers who accept their unhappy lot as God’s will. The slave realizes that his belief in God is explained in a way that fails to connect it to a reality that makes it true; raised as he was, he would believe in God whether or not God exists. He might now conclude that his belief in God is unreasonable, and that he must abandon it, but he avoids this disheartening conclusion. He realizes that other people share his religious belief, people never in the evil slave master’s control. He seeks them out, asks them why they believe, and they direct his attention to evidence that after careful examination he finds adequate. He continues to believe in God and he does so reasonably, even though he continues to accept the debunking explanation of how he initially acquired his belief.

An explanation that debunks a belief leaves open the possibility of its being reacquired by other routes that make it reasonable. A debunking explanation does not prove that a belief is

false, nor does it prove that it is in every case held unreasonably. It challenges its reasonableness, but this challenge might be overcome. A useful analogy lies in conspiracy theories, which are both perennially popular and widely dismissed as irrational. The innate readiness of the human mind to accept explanations of untoward events that involve the intentions of unseen agents figures in the cognitive theory of religion. A reasonable conjecture is that it also explains the common disposition to fix on conspiracy explanations on the basis of at best minimal evidence. Someone is most likely worse off if enemies are plotting against him and he is unaware of it, than if they are not but he does not know it. Recognizing this evolved structure of human cognition—the preference for false positives over false negatives—we are reasonably skeptical of such explanations when others promote them, and we are reasonably cautious when it comes to offering them ourselves. Some theorists go so far as to contend that while we should acknowledge the possibility, it is never reasonable in practice to accept conspiracy as an explanation.²³ This is an understandable reaction to the proliferation of bizarre conspiracy explanations, but what seems more reasonable is simply to recognize the attraction such explanations can have and proceed with extra caution, accepting them only in the rare cases where there is strong evidence.²⁴ In particular, any inclination to arrive at a conspiracy

²³ E.g., Brian L. Keely, “Of Conspiracy Theories” *Journal of Philosophy* 96 (1999): 109-126. Whatever plausibility this has seems to depend on the practice of labeling an explanation a conspiracy theory only if one believes it is false and absurd; conspiracy explanations one accepts do not count as conspiracy theories. “Conspiracy theory” is in practice short for “unsubstantiated conspiracy theory.” Those who believe that John Wilkes Booth belonged to a group seeking to kill not only Abraham Lincoln, but also the Vice President and the Secretary of State, dismiss those who hold the idea that Lee Harvard Oswald did not act alone on November 22, 1963 as “conspiracy buffs.” And those who take for granted that it was not a coincidence that four airplane hijackings occurred on the morning of September 11, 2001, but that this was the work of a conspiratorial group, dismiss the idea that the United States government was behind the attacks as a conspiracy theory. Many explanatory hypotheses are unreasonable, including many conspiracy theories, but not simply because they involve conspiracies.

²⁴ The view that while the claims of religions could be true, it is never reasonable to accept them, is in some respects similar to David Hume’s well-known critique of belief in miracles in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), Sec. X. Here too, the reasonable response to our native credulity with

conclusion simply because it seems obvious should be dismissed and whatever evidence there might be in its favor should be weighed at a discount. In light of natural human inclinations, no conspiracy theory deserves the benefit of the doubt. It should be treated as guilty until proved innocent.

The cognitive theory suggests the need for similar care with respect to the manifold claims of religion, including those of one’s own religion. Any religious claim should initially be regarded as probably false and should be accepted only on the basis of cautiously evaluated evidence. There is one simple, though not necessarily easy, solution to the debunking challenge: The threat can be neutralized by finding good reasons for religious beliefs, reasons that can be identified independent of the operation of the cognitive mechanisms the theory posits. The reasonable response to the realization that human beings are innately disposed toward certain kinds of belief, for which we actually have little or no evidence, is not to commit ourselves to avoid them altogether. It is to nurture a degree of suspicion toward our inclination to such beliefs, and to accept them only on the basis of evidence carefully vetted and reasoning rigorously examined.²⁵ It is in particular to reject out of hand claims that it is simply *obvious* that such and such is the case, and to insist on real evidence. The human mind is replete with cognitive machinery that makes various things seem to us entirely plausible, irrespective of their truth or falsity. Science can reveal that what strikes us as obvious is what most warrants critical examination.

respect to reports of the miracles is due diligence in the evaluation of evidence, not the *a priori* rejection that Hume counsels.

²⁵J. L. Mackie, in *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 7-8, writes, “...if we can show that a certain belief would be almost universally held, even if it were groundless...there is no clear onus of proof on either side.” This esteemed philosopher, who was an atheist, seems to me overly generous to theism. I take it that a heavy burden of justification falls to those of us who persist in belief in the face of debunking explanations.

Copyright Donald H. Wacome. Readers of this item may copy it without the copyright owner’s permission as long as the author and publisher (NWCommons) are acknowledged in the copy and the copy is used for educational, not-for-profit purposes.

It is common practice to label religious beliefs matters of faith and to assume that this somehow insulates them from demands for rational justification. The contrary view is that at least so far as Christianity is concerned, faith should be understood not as sub-rational belief, but as trust in the God who resurrected Jesus Christ. Trust can be either reasonable or unreasonable. Faith does not relieve us of the obligation to proportion belief to the quality of the evidence. The cognitive theory of religion, or of any plausible scientific explanation of human religiosity, does not debunk the Christian faith, but it constrains any tendency to be overly sanguine about the quality of the justification of the beliefs presupposed by faith in Jesus Christ. Realizing that simply in virtue of being human we are inclined to believe in divine beings on the basis of the most minimal evidence, we see how ill-considered it is to regard our theological convictions as more securely established than the confirmed theories of the sciences. We see, too, how inappropriate it is to condemn those who do not accept the claims of Christianity as intellectually dishonest or unreasonable. A proper Christian intellectual humility confesses that the reasons for Christian belief are good enough, not that they are better, or even as strong as, the reasons we have for many other things we believe. When it comes to our beliefs, there is no correlation of quality of evidence and importance. Perhaps, in light of this, it is especially worthwhile to remove spurious grounds for regarding the Christian faith unreasonable, such as the idea that it is at odds with what contemporary science shows us about the world and our place in it.

Debunking and Design

The cognitive theory of religion, if true, does not debunk religious belief as such, but it does show that it is not properly basic. If we identify entirely natural mechanisms that make it seem simply obvious that there are supernatural agents, then we cannot reasonably believe in

them just because their existence seems so obvious. Religious belief might be reasonable, but only if it is grounded in explicit evidence.

Some thinkers believe this conclusion can be avoided, that we can accept both the cognitive theory of religion and religious beliefs as properly basic, among those that can be reasonably held even in the absence of evidence. The debunking threat arises because the scientific explanation posits causes of the belief in divine beings that would do their work whether or not such beings exist, and thus whether or not the beliefs are true. Possibly, the belief formation process the cognitive theory describes only appears to be unreliable, and in fact the belief is the effect of a reliable causal mechanism designed by God. Any natural explanation can, in principle, be integrated into a more comprehensive supernatural explanation, one in which the scientifically explained phenomenon was intended by God. What science portrays as a mere accidental byproduct of human evolution might in fact be a product of divine design. What on the surface looks like the interaction of a hodgepodge of disparate evolved mental mechanisms could in fact constitute the divinely designed process that reliably disposes human beings to believe in supernatural beings. Paul Bloom writes, “If there is an omnipotent God, then he could have orchestrated the universe so that belief in him could have emerged in any fashion whatever.”²⁶ The belief in God to which our cognitive architecture disposes us could be reliably connected to the divine reality that makes it true. Innate human religiosity could be God’s design, either because the creation is deterministic, and this apparently accidental outcome is the inevitable outcome of the laws and initial conditions, or because God intervened in human evolution, seeing to it that we acquired mental mechanisms that would not have appeared in the

²⁶ Paul Bloom, “Religious Belief as an Evolutionary Accident” in *The Believing Primate: Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Reflections on the Origin of Religion*, eds. Jeffrey Schloss and Michael Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 126.

natural course of events. Justin Barrett, contemplating the origin of religion, has a version of the latter in mind when he suggests that God might have “orchestrated mutations and selection to produce the sort of organisms we are—evolution through ‘supernatural selection’.”²⁷

Science does not debunk belief in God merely by discovering how God caused it. Against the charge that those who believe in God would believe whether or not the belief is true, those who adopt this strategy, whether in its determinist or interventionist version, are entitled to respond that if God did not exist, then he would *not* believe that God exists, since if God did not exist there would be no world and no evolutionary processes giving rise to creatures with beliefs about God or anything else.²⁸ Thus his belief tracks the truth of the matter, as rational belief must. Those who invoke the cognitive theory—or any scientific explanation of the origins of religious belief—to challenge the rationality of belief in God need not agree, but it is not incumbent upon theists to abandon their belief that God created the world and designed its human inhabitants in order cogently to respond to the debunker’s claim. When the reasonableness of a belief is challenged, one does not beg the question by refusing to grant the assumption that one’s belief is false.

If human beings spontaneously believe in a divine reality because this is how God intended them to be, then our disposition to believe is not an accident, a fluke that bears no causal connection to a reality that makes the beliefs true. Some Christian traditions explicitly embrace this view. Calvin, probably its most well-known advocate, taught that God has implanted a *sensus divinitatis* in human beings. This innate sense of divinity is a disposition,

²⁷ Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?*, 123.

²⁸ See, e.g., Michael J. Murray, “Scientific Explanations of Religion and the Justification of Religious Belief,” in *The Believing Primate: Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Reflections on the Origin of Religion*, eds. Jeffrey Schloss and Michael Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 168-178.

triggered by ordinary experience of the world, to believe that it is the creation of a wise and good God, and to feel oneself obligated to obey and worship him.²⁹ Belief in God is reasonable, even when no reasons for it can be articulated, because it is the product of a causal mechanism that reliably produces true beliefs.

Some beliefs are, at face value, properly basic, and scientific investigation into their causes does not undermine their reasonableness. For example, someone has a belief about the past: that he had cornflakes for breakfast earlier today. Asked what he had for breakfast, he pauses for a moment and he finds himself with this belief about the past. He might have had evidence, e.g., dishes in the sink, a stray flake in the beard, his wife’s surveillance video, but in this instance he has none. Nonetheless, in the absence of reasons to doubt what he seems to remember, it is reasonable for him to think that he really does remember. We have some scientific knowledge of the neural mechanisms that cause human beings to have beliefs about the past, and while it indicates that they are not always as reliable as we might have supposed, they do reliably cause true beliefs about the past. The causal explanation that identifies the cognitive mechanisms that provide us with beliefs about the past does not threaten to debunk them. Having acquired some scientific knowledge of the causes of memory beliefs, we remain reasonably confident that what we seem to remember is true.³⁰

It is possible that what the cognitive theory of religion uncovers are the workings of a divinely designed *sensus divinitatis*, one that disposes humans to properly basic, and thus

²⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I, xi, 8. For a close examination of the interpretive issues see Paul Helm, “Natural Theology and the *Sensus Divinitatis*” in his *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³⁰ Scientific inquiry itself could not, of course, get far without relying on memory, so any wholesale discrediting of its reliability would be self-defeating. The same is true of perception and reasoning. The interesting results are those in which scientific investigation reveals the complex profiles of reliability and unreliability in the operation of our faculties; on memory see, e.g., Daniel L. Schacter, *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers* (New York: Mariner Books, 2002).

reasonable, beliefs about God. Yet invoking this possibility does not make for a credible response to the debunking challenge. To see this, we can return to the analogy of the slave. Suppose that instead of going in search of independent reasons for his religious beliefs, he realizes that what he has learned about the causes of his belief can be subsumed into a more comprehensive religious account. He decides that the master’s evil deeds were the means God employed to engender faith in him and his fellow slaves. Pondering the biblical story of the deliverance of the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt, when God manipulated the mind of Pharaoh to achieve his ends, he judges that this is just the kind of thing the God in whom he believes would do.

The slave’s enlarged account of how and why he was caused to acquire belief in God might be true, but it does not deliver him from the debunking threat. An adequate response to the threat exposure of the master’s machinations poses calls for more than the possibility the slave envisages. He can avoid the debunking of his belief in God only if he has good reasons to believe that this is what actually happened, and those reasons must not be tainted by the master’s indoctrination program. To incorporate the slave master’s scheme into God’s greater plan, and thereby neutralize the challenge to the reasonableness of his belief in God, he must appeal to what he knows independently of anything the master taught him. For while the slave’s comprehensive theistic explanation could be true, it could instead be true that the master is very clever and exercised the foresight to prime his victims with the disposition to arrive at precisely these beliefs about his being God’s instrument. Thus, even when his slaves mature and realize what has been going on, rather than regarding their beliefs as debunked, they continue as docile workers. If the slave has nothing to go on other than what he has been taught by the master, he

has no reason to think one of these possibilities is more likely than the other, and he cannot reasonably cling to his belief.³¹ Faced with the explanation that appears to undermine his belief, he cannot reasonably defend its reasonableness by assuming that it is true. As in the first case, his only hope for reasonable belief in the God he was raised to believe in is to find evidence not connected to his master’s machinations.

Similarly, if we accept the cognitive theory of religion, we may reasonably continue to believe, and to go on to devise an account that locates the mental machinery it describes in God’s creation, but only if we acquire reasons to believe that the cognitive theory does not explain. In the event of a well-confirmed scientific explanation of religious belief, the charge that belief in God is unreasonable can be answered, but not by appeal to its being properly basic.

Religion without Design

Even if appeal to a divinely designed *sensus divinitatis* could rebut the debunking charge inherent in the scientific explanation of religiosity, it would be a strategy we have a good reason to avoid. Divine design is fundamentally at odds with God’s purpose of creating persons truly distinct from, and capable of communion with, their Creator. God eschewed design and made use of indeterministic natural processes to bring us into existence. We must seek to integrate the cognitive theory into a larger account that portrays the world as God’s creation without reliance on design. Human beings have an innate tendency toward belief in divine beings, but not

³¹ The case of the indoctrinated slave, while extreme, is similar to that of anyone raised in a religious home. A normal human child believes whatever she is taught about religious matters and many other things; she is not unreasonable or intellectually defective in believing that there is a God if this is what her parents believe. When she reaches adulthood, she will have any number of beliefs that she cannot justify; they are simply things she has “always” believed. In the absence of reasons to doubt them, it is reasonable for her to continue to believe them. This *intellectual conservatism*, applied to beliefs acquired as a matter of childhood credulity, renders many beliefs reasonable even in the absence of justification. However, as soon as she comes upon reasons to doubt them, she can no longer reasonably believe without explicit justification. Likewise, once she encounters a plausible debunking explanation of how she and her forebears acquired a belief, she can no longer reasonably continue with it without justification.

because this is what God specifically intended. It is, as secular proponents of the cognitive theory tell us, merely a byproduct of human evolution. Therefore, we require an alternative account of the role of natural human religiosity, one that does not portray it as designed.³²

The cognitive theory of religion does not show that Christian belief is unreasonable, but it does highlight the challenge of showing that it is reasonable. It might seem, then, that Christians have no reason to cheer on the project of naturalizing religious belief. However, this is too quick a conclusion. We should reject the attempt to integrate the scientific explanation of human religiosity into a grand scheme of divine design, but there is another, better, way to understand human religiosity and God’s interest in it. Abandoning the idea that our religious instincts are part of a divine design plan, we can proceed to an account of their role in God’s dealings with human beings, one that makes it reasonable to welcome, rather than fear, the incursion of science into the domain of religion.

Religion and Morality

From the perspective of Christian faith, we can acknowledge human religiosity as in important ways analogous to morality. Both are, at bottom, features of human nature, explicable without appeal to the miraculous or to divine beings. Neither on its face indicates any trace of human contact with anything that transcends the natural world. Both are, to all appearances, the product of the long and contingent evolutionary history that resulted in *Homo sapiens*. That

³² A virtue of this account is that it makes the vast diversity of human religiosity unproblematic. In contrast, some account is required of why, if the innate mechanisms that incline to religious beliefs were designed by God, they do not reliably produce *theistic* belief. Why would God, intending to equip human beings with an innate disposition to religious belief, endow us with one which is only generic, so readily triggered to produce polytheism or animism? Why not simply belief in the one God? Calvin held that the original endowment *was* theistic, but among the noetic effects of the Fall was the degradation of the *sensus divinitatis*. In sinful human beings a defective sense of divinity remains; corrupted by human pride and arrogance, it has become “a perpetual factory of idols” (Calvin, *Institutes*, I. 11. 8). Whether this is psychologically, anthropologically, or historically plausible is, at best, arguable. We may ask, for example, whether there is evidence of devolution from theistic to polytheistic and animistic religion in the human past.

history could have followed a different course; if it had, the personal creatures—if any—that would have existed instead of us might have had significantly different, or no, moral nature, and no, or a significantly different, religious sensibility.

However, the naturalistic explanation of morality and of religion differ in a significant way: morality is an adaptation while religiosity, although it arises from the interaction of mental mechanisms that are adaptations, is not itself an adaptation. There was selection, e.g., for the desire to retaliate against humans who cheat us, but no selection for the desire to make sacrifices to placate unseen spirits. The explanation of the former presupposes cheating conspecifics; the explanation of the latter posits no angry spirits. The evolutionary explanation of morality undermines certain ways of construing the nature of moral truth, giving us good reasons to doubt the vision of moral knowledge as a grasp of something that transcends this world, or even objectively inheres in it. But it does not warrant systemic doubt about there being moral truth, even if it points to its being more mundane than some have envisaged it. It reveals the superficiality of our moral categories, projected upon the social world, but it does not imply that the actions we have evolved to categorize as, e.g., cheating, do not occur. Natural selection has crafted human minds to detect and respond to cheaters. To ascertain that a human being, in virtue of neural circuitry that came about as an adaptation to life as a Stone Age hunter-gatherer, is inclined toward a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral response to a particular kind of social interaction which she describes as unfair, is not to discover that her moral judgment is mistaken or irrational. It may be firmly rooted in desires she has no reason to disown and good reason to nurture. Learning the origins of our moral minds gives us some worthwhile critical distance on our moral responses and it teaches us that moral reasons cannot be finally disentangled from our

own desires, but it does not debunk morality.³³ The causal explanation of how we came to have moral beliefs reliably links them to the social reality in virtue of which they are often true.

In contrast, the cognitive explanation of the causes of religious belief reveals no causal connection of belief in supernatural agents to any such beings that actually exist. Science, in the form of the cognitive theory of religion, challenges the rationality of religious belief in ways that evolutionary theory does not challenge the rationality of morality.

God and Religion

Despite the significantly different implications of naturalistic explanations of morality and of religion, there is a perspective from which a deeper similarity comes into view. Contrary to what many suppose, morality has no necessary, originating connection to God. Morality is a naturally occurring feature of the human persons to which the Creator accommodates himself, employing our moral sentiments and judgments when the behavior they prompt corresponds to what he cares about: the persons he loves and who benefit from altruistic acts. Rejecting the possibility of design, God utilizes indeterministic means to create persons. Once they exist, God sets about making himself known to them, inviting them to know, trust, and love him. For this task, he makes use of what is ready to hand, whatever aspects of their evolved nature help elicit a positive response. An important dimension of the positive response God seeks in his personal creatures is for them to share his attitude to human beings, to love them in a way that mirrors the way God loves them. Nurturing our innate dispositions to altruism—our moral nature—is far from the whole of this, but it constitutes an essential core. We cannot love one another as God

³³ However, *fictionalism* rejects this happy conclusion and contends that the evolutionary explanation implies that our moral beliefs are systematically false. See Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). In contrast to the cognitive explanation of religious belief, which is consistent with the existence of the unseen beings in which the religious believe, the fictionalist says that the implication is that moral beliefs are false, not merely unreasonable.

loves us unless, at the very least, we act with minimal moral decency toward one another. On the other hand, when the actions that our moral instincts motivate are contrary to the well-being of the persons God loves his attitude toward them is critical. Human morality is under divine judgment, not because it falls short of some sort of ultimately objectively correct morality—there is no such thing—but because it is at odds with God’s aims.

I suggest that we see human religiosity as given an analogous role in God’s purposeful interaction with human beings. Our natural religiosity, like our natural morality, has no necessary connection to God, but God finds aspects of it of use in his project of bringing humanity into fellowship with himself. From the perspective of inveterately religious creatures like ourselves, God’s relation to religiosity can seem confusingly ambiguous. Our Creator appears to be both for and against religion.

Christianity is one religion among others. There is no reason to deny that it fits the definition of religion advanced by cognitive theorists. Christians believe that there is an unseen agent who has powers far greater than those of human beings, who knows what human beings are doing and cares about certain aspects of their behavior, particularly behavior that affects human well-being, and whose actions are to some degree intelligible in terms of our familiar psychology of belief and desire. We pray to this being, hoping to influence his behavior, and we engage in communal rituals intended as acts of worship. Irrespective of whether Christian beliefs can be rationally justified, we know that to all appearances Christians acquire their beliefs about the object of their worship, and reason about him, in ways essentially similar to those of adherents of other faiths.³⁴ Similarly, leaving aside the question of whether they are veridical,

³⁴ For example, the disparity between the “theologically correct” conceptions of deities and the concepts the faithful actually employ in daily life appears to be the same for Christians and other believers. What the Christian theist

the religious experiences that Christians report do not appear to involve neural structures or activity essentially different than those involved in the experience of other religious persons. Yet the God who reveals himself to human beings in the Bible, as a human being in Jesus Christ, is strangely ambivalent about religion.

God and the Gods

Whatever its paradoxical flavor, the idea that God is both for and against religion, that he places it under judgment while using it in pursuit of his aims has deep roots in biblical faith. The modern project of justifying belief in an unseen deity is foreign to the authors of the Bible; they take it for granted that human beings believe in gods. Scripture bears witness to the one true God, the Yahweh of Israel, but other gods lurk in the background. A trajectory from polytheism to henotheism to monotheism is discernible in the biblical narrative. It can be disconcerting to the modern reader of Scripture that initially the existence of various gods is assumed, and that God at first asserts not that no other gods exist, but that the people to whom he has revealed himself owe him their sole allegiance. The Decalogue begins: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2). God continues, prohibiting the worship of idols, “...for I the Lord your God am a jealous God...” (20:5). God allows himself to be conceived of as one deity among others, accommodating himself to the innate, and at this point culturally entrenched, religious dispositions of the people he has called.

officially believes as a result of religious instruction, e.g., God is infinite and omnipresent, can be trumped by implicit anthropomorphic ideas shaped by the innate information processing that gives rise to religion in general. See Justin L. Barrett, *Born Believers: The Science of Children's Religious Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 157-166. For more discussion of the experimental results see, Justin L. Barrett and Frank C. Keil, “Conceptualizing a Nonnatural Entity: Anthropomorphism in God Concepts” *Cognitive Psychology* 31(1996): 219-247.

Copyright Donald H. Wacome. Readers of this item may copy it without the copyright owner's permission as long as the author and publisher (NWCommons) are acknowledged in the copy and the copy is used for educational, not-for-profit purposes.

However, the movement out of polytheism is soon underway. Yahweh, the God that called Abraham and liberated Israel, is not comparable to other gods. This is the deity that defeated and humiliated the powerful gods of mighty Egypt. Once the people are installed in the promised land, Yahweh’s demand for unique allegiance seems unreasonable. Impressive as Yahweh is as a warrior-god, surely other gods must be negotiated with if human needs are to be supplied, if, e.g., people, their animals, and their lands are to be fertile. Thus we find the persistent impulse of God’s people to hedge their bets, to make offerings to the local gods, particularly to those in control of the weather in a land vulnerable to drought.³⁵ The opposition to this natural religious tendency does not immediately take the form of denying the existence of competing gods, but of undercutting their relevance. Against the temptations of idolatry the prophets of Yahweh insist that he is supreme among the gods, and that he can be relied on to provide all Israel’s needs. The demand that he alone be worshipped is reasonable only on the assumption that the people need nothing from other gods. The local gods are useless, not worthy of worship. In fact, these lesser gods worship Yahweh, the supreme deity, attending him in his heavenly court. In due course, the absolute supremacy of God above the gods is articulated in the elegant account of his creation of heaven and earth, clearly critiquing the creation mythology of the dominant Mesopotamian culture. The world humans inhabit is God’s good and trustworthy creation. There is no need to appease lesser gods to ensure its proper functioning. In God’s creation, the rains come in their season; there is no need to deal with the storm god Baal to prevent drought. No gods must be placated to guarantee human well-being. The old rituals

³⁵ See, e.g., Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 83-99.

devised for this purpose are transformed into celebrations of, and thanksgiving for, the Creator’s gracious care of his world and its inhabitants.

Condescending to natural human religiosity, God does not immediately expose the nothingness of the gods. It appears that the people of Israel need first to be assured that the gods are useless before they can be persuaded that they do not exist. When it comes, the announcement is dramatic. A remarkable text, Psalm 82, describes the demise of the gods:

God has taken his place in the divine council;

In the midst of the gods he holds judgment (82:1).

God’s judgment on the gods arises from his concern for the welfare of human beings: They have shown partiality to the wicked. They have withheld justice from the weak and the orphan. They have not maintained the right of the lowly and destitute; they have not rescued them from the hand of the wicked. God is just, fully committed to the persons he loves. But the gods have no knowledge and no understanding; they are in the dark (82:2-5). God pronounces his judgment on them:

I say, “You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you;

Nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince (82:7).

Immortality, the distinctive characteristic of the divine, is taken away; the gods are no longer gods. The henotheistic belief in a single high God, like the polytheistic belief that preceded it, is at last cast aside, having served God’s purposes. Worship of the gods can now be exposed for what it is: bowing down to what is no god at all. In texts that must have been stunningly irreligious in the ancient world, God’s prophets mock the idols and those who revere them. The prophetic voice recorded in Isaiah 44 describes a craftsman, taking a block of wood, some of

which he uses to make a fire to cook his food and to keep warm, and painstakingly fashioning an idol from the remainder. Having made it from this mundane material with his own hands, ludicrously he now bows and prays, “Save me, for you are my god!” (44:12-17). Sounding like an ancient Richard Dawkins, Jeremiah lampoons the pious worshippers of his day: “Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk” (10:5). God has made his use of humans’ natural inclination to worship and serve a variety of gods, but it can now be gleefully dispensed with.

Religion and Creation

There is nothing remarkable in the idea of a deity who endorses, or demands, religious activity when it is directed to him in whatever ways he deems correct, but who opposes the worship of competing gods. Nor is it amazing if he eventually proclaims all competing divine beings non-existent. Yet the biblical narrative, beginning with the story of creation, suggests a deeper and more systemic divine objection to human religiosity. This is difficult to make sense of on the assumption that human religiosity is a product of divine design, a feature of human nature the Creator always intended. If God’s attitude is broadly negative, even—paradoxically— involving his final rejection of the religious practices he also calls for, this coheres better with the idea that religion is not God’s design, but something in us that he finds to be of use, but of strictly limited use, in his attempts to save his wayward creatures.

The primeval history found in the beginning of Genesis is not, of course, an historical record of actual events. Its aim is to teach us how to see the world through the lens of God’s self-revelation in the real history of Israel. Taken this way, it provides insight into how God sees human religiosity. Since the late 19th century it has been known that the biblical account of

creation is not *sui generis* but draws on mythic material from the surrounding cultures, especially those of Mesopotamia. What is significant about the biblical story of origins is not that it is utterly original—it isn’t—but that it deploys the concepts and categories of the Ancient Near East so as to challenge and subvert the prevailing religious world view. The Bible accepts the cosmology of a flat earth spread out under the metal dome of heaven in which the sun, moon, and stars are embedded, but it denies the celestial entities their customary divine status. It refers to them not by their proper names, which derive from names of gods, but merely as “lights,” created by the God of Israel and placed in the heavens to make possible the ordering of day and night, and of the seasons, and to provide illumination for the earth’s inhabitants. They are not divine beings but mere creatures, made by God for the benefit of human beings. As a chronological ordering of events this is incongruous: There is light, the ordering of day and night, and vegetation *before* the sun comes into existence, but this drives home the point that the sun is not a great, ordering deity, on whom all this ultimately depends, but just one of God’s creatures.³⁶ Nor, in God’s creation, is there any need to bargain with gods for the fertility of crops or livestock. The earth gives rise to plants and animals that in the natural course of events reproduce after their kind.

The Genesis creation story says nothing about human beings serving God or offering him sacrifices. J. Richard Middleton, pointing out the significance of this omission in Israel’s cultural context, writes:

Since the primary cultic means of securing divine blessing and fertility in ancient Mesopotamia would have been the sacrificial system—the provision of food and drink

³⁶ Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 30-31.

for the gods, as part of the imposed servitude of humanity—it is significant that in *Genesis* 1 it is God who graciously provides food for both humans and animals.³⁷

The role of human beings in Ancient Near Eastern culture is “to bear the yoke of the gods,” serving them in cultic practices.³⁸ This sharply contrasts with the role God gives human beings as such, which is to rule over the rest of creation. Edenic humans have a vocation—to till the garden and watch over it—but this is not arduous toil, in contrast to what they endure after they are evicted and they must feed themselves by tilling the cursed ground. In Mesopotamian religion, humans must feed the gods as well as themselves. The Babylonian *Astrahasis* epic describes humans as originally created to alleviate the gods of work, but later overpopulating the Earth and becoming a noisy nuisance that the gods deal with by means of disease, drought, famine and eventually a great flood.³⁹ The God of biblical faith, in contrast, instructs his human creatures: “be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth...” (Genesis 1:28).

Of singular importance is the Genesis assertion that God created human beings in his image. Middleton writes, “The description of ancient Near Eastern kings as the image of a god, when understood as an integral component of Egyptian and/or Mesopotamian royal ideology, provides the most plausible set of parallels for understanding for interpreting the *imago Dei* in Genesis 1.”⁴⁰ Contemporary scholarship favors interpreting the image not as a claim about human capabilities, but in light of the practice of describing a local king as the viceroy of the

³⁷ J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 211.

³⁸ Claus Westermann, *Genesis*, trans. David E. Green (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 11.

³⁹ The account of the Flood in Genesis clearly derives from the Mesopotamian traditions. See, e.g., Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005). However, the biblical explanation of the legendary deluge is radically different: It is God’s attempt to save a remnant from extinction threatened by human violence.

⁴⁰ Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 121.

distant high king, and of regarding the kings themselves as divine, or quasi-divine, images of a deity. In the religious mythology of Mesopotamian civilizations, humans are created to relieve the lesser gods of the arduous tasks of building and maintaining irrigation canals, growing food, building temples, and thus sustaining the elaborate system of cultic sacrifice by which the gods were fed. This mythic explanation of human origins explained and legitimized the actual hierarchical social structure, in which the mass of people labored for the benefit of the ruling royal and priestly classes.

In this context, the biblical description of human beings as such, both male and female, as the image of God was a radical critique of religion and the political regimes it justified and maintained. In a world where a human elite claims to represent the divine and rule over lesser humans, this conception of the *imago* has “revolutionary political potential.”⁴¹ The Creator gives human beings as such, not princes and priests, and not lesser gods, the authority to rule in his creation (Genesis 1:28).

We do not have to construe this as a critique of religion as such, but what cannot be denied is that it functions as a profound attack on the salient religious mentality of the dominant surrounding culture. One might suppose that God created humans always intending them to worship him correctly, and that the creation account is intended to steer the people of Israel away from the false religions of Babylonia and Assyria toward the true religion, but if we do, then with Matthew Myer Boulton we must ask, “Where is the temple in Eden? If God created human beings to offer God thanks and praise, then how is it that the first man and woman receive no such

⁴¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 219.

instruction, nor offer any such thing?”⁴² At face value, God created humans to care for his creation for the purpose of using and enjoying it; religious practice has no obvious place in this vocation. Prior to the Fall there are no rituals, no offerings, no altars; all this appears only after humans rebel and damage the initially intimate relation to their Creator, who makes himself empirically—though not overtly—present.⁴³ The account of the aftermath of the first religious dispute, which eventuates in the first murder, concludes with the enigmatic statement, “At that time people began to invoke the name of the Lord” (Genesis 4:26), perhaps a reference to the beginning of religion as a human institution.

Sacrifice

Soon after God expels Eve and Adam from Eden, their sons, Abel and Cain, bring offerings to God (Genesis 4). There is no mention of God commanding this, and no explanation is offered of why they do it. It appears that as soon as humans are evicted from Eden, they naturally and spontaneously offer a portion of what they have produced to God. The brothers seem to regard religious sacrifice simply as what one ought to do, as though this is, as our scientific account has it, an innate disposition.

It is easy to suspect that Cain, the farmer, feels he needs to give God something to induce him to supply rain and fertility for his crops. If so, humankind’s first religious act manifests a lack of trust in God.

⁴² Matthew Myer Boulton, *God against Religion: Rethinking Christian Theology through Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 64.

⁴³ The story describes Eve and Adam hearing God speak, and hearing him walk in the garden, but it does not say that they see him.

Also absent from the story is any explanation of why God accepts Abel’s sacrifice but rejects Cain’s.⁴⁴ Eventually, as the biblical narrative develops, the difference between proper and improper forms of worship and the condemnation of the worship of other gods become crucial matters in the history of Israel. Even if, as it appears, God does not institute religion, from its inception he recruits it to his purposes. In this sense, God accepts religion, but his use of it is critical, not an uncritical endorsement.

Abel’s offering of animals to God foreshadows the later religion of Israel, in which the ritual sacrifice of animals occupies a central role. Regulations for a complex system of animal and other sacrifices are spelled out in detail, yet almost nothing by way of explanation is offered for why God wants his people to engage in this practice. That good relations with the deity call for gift-giving is, as the cognitive theory of religion tells us, something human beings find intuitively obvious. The unseen divine agents, differing from human beings in significant ways, are nonetheless similar to humans in any number of other ways; in particular, they might have desires that humans can satisfy, and satisfying those desires might induce them to do things we want. Belief in gods activates the mental machinery evolved for human social interaction, and we find intuitively plausible the prospect of reciprocally beneficial exchanges with them. Like us, they are angered by bad behavior but they can be placated with gifts. Because they are more powerful than human beings, it is dangerous to offend them, so, if amends can be made by offerings, it is wise to do so. (Here we should recall that the disposition to belief in the gods is due in part to our mechanisms for detecting predators, not beings that love us.) Gifts might also

⁴⁴ God’s response to human religion is not easy to predict. Yoram Hazony, in *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 107-110, points out how surprising it is that God rejects Cain’s offering, despite the fact that it is he, not his brother, who submits to the divine pronouncement (Genesis 3:17-19), making his living by agricultural toil. Abel, seemingly ignoring the curse, turns to sheepherding, yet it is his sacrifice that God accepts.

recruit the superhuman powers of the gods to our benefit, for example to cure the sick, ensure fertility or a good crop. It is natural for human beings to believe that the gods (ancestors, spirits, etc.) are there, and can be bargained with, as we trade what we have and they want, e.g., roast pig, for what they have and we want, e.g., victory in the upcoming battle. Even if the unseen god cannot actually eat the offered meat—which is conveniently available to sustain his priests—he receives it in some way peculiar to a god, by way of the smoke and the delightful smell, perhaps in this way consuming its life or soul.

A few Old Testament texts allude to this type of explanation. After the Flood, Noah makes burnt offerings of animals and God, pleased with the odor, promises not to repeat his destruction of humankind (Genesis 8:20-21). And in Leviticus instructions on the proper methods for sacrificing bulls, sheep or goats, and birds conclude with the description, “a burnt offering, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord (1:9, 13, 17). Whatever its rationale, for Israel the sacrificial activity continued, when possible, until the destruction of the Second Temple in A.D. 70.

However, there are countervailing biblical voices. God, having made use of the natural human inclination to religious sacrifice, appears to repudiate it. In Psalm 50 God speaks about sacrifices, at first positively:

Gather to me my faithful ones,

Who made a covenant with me by sacrifice! (50:5)

Hear, O my people, and I will speak,

O Israel, I will testify against you

I am God, your God (50:7)

Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you

Your burnt offerings are continually before me (50:8)

Whatever God has against his people, it is not the ritual offerings they have given him. Yet the psalm continues:

I will not accept a bull from your house,

Or goats from your folds. (50:9)

If I were hungry, I would not tell you

For the world and all that is in it is mine.

Do I eat the flesh of bulls,

Or drink the blood of goats? (50:12-13)

In a similar vein, Isaiah delivers God’s denunciation of the religious efforts of his people:

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?

I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams

and the fat of fed beasts;

I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

When you come to appear before me who asked this from your hands? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile! (1:11-12)

In what might be the most overtly anti-religious assertion in the Old Testament, the prophet Micah asks:

With what shall I come before the Lord,

And bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has told you o mortal, what is good; and what the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (6:6-8).

Ritual sacrifice supplies God with nothing he wants or needs, and God emphatically repudiates the thought, so deeply rooted in the human mind, that deals can be made with God. God makes a covenant with human beings, but this is ultimately a matter of what God freely gives, not a reciprocal exchange in which humans have something to give God. Insofar as the desire to negotiate with the divine and thereby accrue favor is integral to human religiosity, we should read these texts as God rejecting religion.

God disowns the cultic practices he once commanded. I suggest that this is best explained on the view that God, finding in human beings a dangerous but deep and initially ineradicable impulse to try to relate to him in this way, made use of it, regulating and channeling it toward faith in him, but aims finally to discard it. In the end, what God requires is not sacrifice but justice: religion is not an end in itself but rather to draw Israel into God’s cause of knowing, and loving, his human creatures.

For a people surrounded by a religious culture seeking to propitiate gods by sacrificing not only animals but children, God devises a religion in which animal sacrifices are made, but rather than being gifts to God—really payments to secure his favor—God symbolically gives the life of the animal to the person who, having sinned, has lost his connection to God and God’s people and is now for all practical purposes dead. God neither punishes the sinner nor exacts a payment that sets things right. Using the forms of human religiosity, God brings him back to life.

God’s subversive use of the human impulse to propitiate the divine by means of costly sacrifice is vividly illustrated in the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). Abraham dutifully follows God’s instructions to sacrifice his son, but at the last moment God rescinds his command and overturns this supreme act of religious devotion, the sacrifice of the beloved son, and supplies the sacrificial victim in place of Isaac. What is the meaning of an offering to God if God himself, not the human individual, supplies the offering? It makes no sense to imagine that one enters into a mutually beneficial exchange with God when God gives what the sacrificer would, in the natural course of events, give. Using the forms under which human beings try to give things to God, God vividly demonstrates that he is the giver. The natural religious mentality,

insofar as it involves the assumption that we can make ourselves right with God by giving him something, is judged and rejected. Just when it looks as though Abraham is about to give up what he values above all—his beloved son and the promised future he represents—God intervenes to give, rather than to receive.

Christian Faith and Religion

Christians confess that the God who reveals himself through Israel finally offers his own life as a sacrifice for sinful yet beloved humankind, letting us do our worst and, in so doing, saving us from ourselves. The Christian faith that proclaims this is one among the world’s many religions, but it embodies the same critical attitude toward religion found in the Old Testament. Despite the persistent propensity to construe sin moralistically, Christian theology contends that the root human problem is not morally bad behavior, but unwillingness to trust God and the ensuing hopeless quest for self-sufficiency and self-justification. The Edenic temptation is not to moral wickedness; it is to be like gods, judging between good and evil. The aim of making this judgment is, of course, to ascertain what is good and to do it, to decide for oneself. It is to deny the reality of what humans are, not gods, but mere creatures, made of the dust of the ground, yet called to partnership with their Creator. Refusing that vocation, ironically humans find themselves not much like gods at all, but vulnerable creatures cast into a perilous world haunted by gods whose approval and help they can only hope to earn. And thus human religiosity becomes the epitome of human sinfulness, the place where we are most emphatically proceeding on our own, trying to be rightly related to the divine by our own efforts.

Historically, this comes into sharp focus in the theology of Martin Luther. Contrasting salvation by grace, through faith alone, with the ubiquitous human attempt to justify oneself, he

writes, “...all the religions and forms of worship under heaven have been thought up by men to obtain righteousness in the sight of God...”⁴⁵ This applies to Christianity as a human institution no less than to other religions:

The self-righteous, who do not have faith, do many things. They fast, they pray, they make the sign of the cross. Yet in their hearts they envision God not as he is but as an angry judge who must be placated by their works. All this religious activity is *reasonable*: of course our correct belief and right action will make us right with God. But proceeding with what seems reasonable they dismiss the gospel of God’s grace as foolishness, and thus “they depose God from his throne and set themselves up in his place.”⁴⁶

Turning away from God, fallen humans turn inward and become—in Luther’s startling image—curved in upon themselves (*homo incurvatus in se*), self-centered, self-satisfied, self-justifying.⁴⁷ “Man,” Luther contends, “is so turned in upon himself that he uses not only physical but spiritual goods for his own purposes and in all things seeks only himself.”⁴⁸ Sinful human beings imagine that they are justified before God by getting their religion right, but in reality it is precisely here that they are most tightly closed to God and trapped in sin.

Luther condemned late-medieval Christendom as a corruption of authentic Christianity, a false religiosity of works—vain attempts to appease God—in opposition to the good news of salvation by faith alone. Arguably, as far as he went, he did not push the critique of our religious

⁴⁵ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, ed. and trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 26, *Luther’s Works*, general eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 231.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁴⁷ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, trans. Jacob A.O. Preus, vol. 25, *Luther’s Works* (1972), 291.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 345.

dispositions to its logical—even if paradoxical—conclusion. Did Luther grant the Christian religion an exemption from the general condemnation of religion as sin at its most entrenched and dangerous?⁴⁹ Perhaps, but in any event, four centuries later Karl Barth emphatically reaches this conclusion and in the most uncompromising terms describes even Christianity—in fact *especially* Christianity—as subject to God’s judgment on religion.

Barth rejects the notion that human beings can escape religion, either by being thoroughly secular, or by arriving at some kind of post-religious Christianity.⁵⁰ “As men living in the world, and being what we are, we cannot hope to escape the possibility of religion.”⁵¹ But he also accepts that religion is *always* idolatry, self-righteousness and unbelief, and that Christianity is no exception. “On the contrary, it is our business as Christians to apply this judgment first and most acutely to ourselves...”⁵² We must, in fact, confess that Christianity is religion at its worst, for it is here that there is explicit witness to God’s revelation that salvation is by grace alone, and thus we rely on our religious works not unknowingly but “with a high hand.”⁵³

Karl Barth’s theological claims correspond to experience. There is no reason to believe that, whatever overt theology of grace we profess, persons of Christian faith are essentially different than the rest of the human species with respect to our deep religious inclinations. Thought, feeling, and action betray the ineradicable suspicion that God can be bargained with, that our good behavior and other “sacrifices” obligate him on our behalf, that our correct

⁴⁹ Boulton, in *God against Religion*, 162-164, suggests that this is so, and that it was left to Barth to come to grips with the matter.

⁵⁰ Barth construes as essentially religious all projects that aim at achieving the good, including moral programs and political ideologies: Even if they do not include belief in unseen divine agents, they are nonetheless human attempts to put themselves in the right. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, 6th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 6th ed. 1968), 241, 254.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁵² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 1, pt. 2:326-327.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 337.

theology—including, absurdly, the avowed belief that God loves us unconditionally—puts us in a privileged position with respect to God. We inevitably draw lines that separate insiders from outsiders, the faithful and the faithless, the good and the bad, as though all such lines run between us and those beyond God’s grace, rather than through each of us. As Christians we partake of universal forms of human religiosity: We bow, pray, sing, worship, perform rituals said to be prescribed by God, and we preach and teach, claiming to proclaim and imbibe the divine word. Barth would not have us forget that in all this we are engaging in the paradigmatic activity of sinful humankind. It is closer to the truth to confess that we Christians, like everyone else, are saved ultimately not because of, but despite, our religion.

Yet Barth would also insist that Christianity *is* the one true religion. Using Luther’s famous slogan, he insists that we can call it the *true religion* only in exactly the same sense that we can call ourselves *justified sinners*. Christianity is true not because here religious humans do better than they do anywhere else, but only because it is here that God has acted, is acting, and will act to save, disrupting human life and adapting our religiosity to his own purposes.

The biblical authors witness to a God who makes room for human beings, giving us space to be ourselves even when this means letting us do our worst, letting us ignore, reject, and rebel against him to the limit, and in the end using what is worst in us to subvert our rebellion and save us. This story’s climax occurs when God puts himself into the hands of angry sinners who condemn him as religiously and politically dangerous and put him to death. This was the all too likely fate for a God who so recklessly loves creatures who everywhere and always turn away from him, aspiring to be not beloved creatures in communion with God, coworkers in his creation, but like gods, going it alone. Where human rejection of God is at its worst, precisely

there God acts to make reconciliation. It is, as Boulton points out, “...only fitting that God’s healing activity should occur in the fatal wound itself...”⁵⁴ God speaks his decisive good word to humankind, his refusal to accept our rejection of him as the last word, by way of religion, where that rejection makes it natural home. It is as religious beings, in particular as adherents of the Christian religion, that we know ourselves as sinners, in need of God’s saving grace.

On this theological account natural human religiosity makes its appearance not as a gift from God, but as a natural proclivity subject to divine judgment. Yet God condescends, commandeers it, and turns it to his ends. In light of this, persons of Christian faith have no reason to look askance on the cognitive theory of religion. That our religious proclivities have a humble, even risible, origin is a discovery we can with due humility embrace.⁵⁵ As with our moral nature, so with our religiosity: The possibility of a scientific explanation that puts it in its natural place is a promise, not a threat. The idea that it, like morality, is no more than a natural feature of being human that God can recruit for his purposes coheres with a proper Christian ambivalence toward religion.

The Christian faith itself demands that we be highly critical, to a degree even suspicious, of our religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices. What to our innate religiosity seems obviously right may be at odds with God’s self-revelation. We may be wired to conceive God on the model of an unseen predator that can be rendered harmless by our sacrifices and manipulated by our rituals, but God has something very different to say about who he is and what he wants. We saw

⁵⁴ Boulton, *God against Religion*, 165.

⁵⁵ Elsewhere I have speculated about how we might conceive the *Fall* and *original sin* in terms of the actual contingencies of human history: We are born into a world in which God is not empirically present. A further conjecture along these lines is that the empirical presence of God renders the disposition to take seriously the existence of unseen agencies harmless. A redeemed world in which we see God with us is one where the output of these interacting mental mechanisms acquires no individual credence or social currency. In the absence of God appearing to us incarnate and empirically, the output of our cognitive architecture can run amok.

above that facing up to the debunking potential of the cognitive theory of religion calls for a self-critical attitude toward our most basic religious beliefs. The fact that it simply seems obvious that God exists is not a good reason to believe that he does exist. The cognitive architecture of human minds explains this psychological phenomenon without assuming the belief is true. Reasonable belief that God exists is possible only on the basis of careful attention to explicit evidence. Similarly, within the Christian religion, what seems obviously correct stands in need of ongoing biblical and theological scrutiny. Science and the Christian faith agree in counseling a critical attitude to our natural pieties. We can embrace the scientific project that unearths the absurd roots of our religious instincts, but we cannot regard our own religious beliefs and practices with complacency.

Religion and the Soul

The cognitive theory explains religion’s connection with death and what follows it. The architecture of human cognition that makes plausible the idea of minds without bodies, and thus enables belief in unseen divine agents, also makes it easy to believe that human minds continue to function after the death of the body. Disembodied minds, whether humans after death or divine agents, are naturally plausible because the mind’s information processing modules do not fully communicate with one another. One mental module processes sensory information and arrives at the conclusion that a biological organism is dead, and this information proceeds to conscious awareness, but the theory of mind module does not get the word; it continues to output beliefs about the mind of the deceased.⁵⁶ This particular manifestation of encapsulation is,

⁵⁶ In many cultures the connection is direct: The unseen agents with whom religious ritual copes are post-mortem human beings, the spirits of the ancestors.

presumably, a contingent feature of the human mind. If our thoroughly material minds were wired slightly differently, we might find gods and souls highly implausible.⁵⁷

On the contemporary scene, belief in the immortal human soul and belief in God are for many so closely intertwined as to be inseparable, and religion is understood as offering the means to a happy post-mortem life. Science has somewhat eroded this, but the assumption that human beings are, by nature, immortal, because the soul, bearer of what is essential to the person, has a disembodied life after the body dies, and that we can look ahead to divine reward or punishment, remains firmly entrenched. This convergence of a dualist view of human nature and religion, sustained by innate cognitive mechanisms and culturally reinforced and elaborated, is widely taken for granted even among Christians. In light of this it is worth recalling that the creation story in Genesis denies the natural immortality of human beings. The primal human couple is expelled from Eden not, at least not explicitly, as a punishment, but to prevent their eating from the *tree of life* and living forever (3:22-24). Eve and Adam, having eaten from the *tree of knowledge*, are now like gods, knowing good and evil, and this is God’s reason for sending them into exile. The combination of this knowledge and immortality is, in God’s eyes, to be avoided, perhaps for the well-being of the human beings themselves. Denied access to the tree of life, humans die.⁵⁸ In keeping with this, and in contrast to the religions of some of its powerful neighbors, ancient Israel singularly lacks interest in what becomes of humans after death. The Old Testament shares the idea, common in the ancient world, that the dead descend to the underworld and there continue to exist. They are imprisoned in *sheol*, the gloomy realm of

⁵⁷ This might explain why there are people, such as your author, who find in themselves no inclination to dualism and, perhaps correspondingly, do not find it at all *obvious* that any sort of divine beings exist, even in the face of systematic childhood training in favor of both. Our cognitive architecture might be abnormal in this regard.

⁵⁸ In *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), James Barr argues that the story should be construed primarily as an account of why and how humans lost their chance for immortality.

the shadowy, lethargic, gibbering, and perhaps only semi-conscious dead. John C. Cooper writes, “The afterlife, if it can be called that, is hopelessly pale and dull in comparison with the *shalom* of a full earthly life.”⁵⁹ In *sheol*, the insubstantial residue of the living human being is cut off from the air and light of the human community and at the farthest remove from God in heaven. We may call this insubstantial existence *life after death*, since we equate life after death with continued *existence* after death, but this would sound odd to the ancients; for them, what follows dying is death, neither non-existence nor a kind of life.

The Old Testament’s attitude to *sheol* exemplifies its hostility to the religious activities of its neighbors. Commerce with the human dead and the gods and spirits, seeking their counsel or aid by divination, was a pervasive feature of ancient religion, but prohibited in Israel. Isaiah condemns those who “consult the ghosts and familiar spirits that chirp and mutter...who consult their gods, the dead on behalf of the living” (8:19). Communication with the spirit realm is condemned as disloyalty to Yahweh, whose provision for his people is sufficient; they need not look to the divine underworld for help (Leviticus 19:31, 20:6; Deuteronomy 18:11).⁶⁰

The people of God looked ahead in vicarious hope, not to a personal post-mortem life, but to future life for Israel as a people and their descendants in particular. N. T. Wright reminds us that “for the vast majority in ancient Israel the great and solid hope, built upon the character of the covenant god, was for Yahweh’s blessing of justice, prosperity and peace upon the nation and land, and eventually upon the whole earth.”⁶¹ However, the idea of post-mortem personal

⁵⁹ John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 41.

⁶⁰ In a well-known episode, King Saul, rejected by God and desperate for help, consults a medium who calls up the recently deceased prophet Samuel. The prophet—referred to by the witch as an *elohim*, i.e., a “divine being” (NRSV) or a “god” (RSV)—denounces Saul and reiterates God’s judgment on the king (1 Samuel 28:6-20).

⁶¹ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 102.

salvation is not entirely absent from the Old Testament. A handful of texts at least hint that God will deliver his people as individuals from *sheol*, e.g., “Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise, O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!” (Isaiah 26:19). “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2). Crucially, these texts are not glimpses of a happy existence in *sheol*, nor do they refer to disembodied existence. They point to the resurrection of the embodied human individual, to complete deliverance from death and restoration to full, physical, human life in God’s good creation.

Unambiguous expressions of faith that God will resurrect human beings are rare in the Old Testament, but Jewish belief in resurrection of the dead became widespread during the four centuries between the last Old Testament prophets and the time of Christ.⁶² This resurrection hope was sharply at odds with the ideas of post-mortem existence found throughout the ancient world. It was not an aspiration to a pleasant version of *sheol*, translation to the heavenly abode of the gods (on the model of Enoch in Genesis 5:28 and Elijah in 2 Kings 2:11), or the disembodiment of the soul envisaged by the Greek philosophers. It was hope for a fully embodied human life in God’s restored material creation. This hope emerges not from reflection upon human nature, but from experience of the character of God witnessed in Israel’s history. The God of Israel is faithful and he gets the last word on what lies in store for those he loves. Even when persecution results in death, he can be trusted to vindicate those martyred on his behalf. God is the Creator and Lord of all, and not even death can finally defeat him and nullify his covenant promises. Human religious instincts produce notions of an escape from this world

⁶² Ibid., 129.

to something better, but faith in the God who resurrects the dead to genuine human life in the redeemed future of his creation challenges that natural religiosity.

In the Gospels Jesus’ friends and disciples believe in the resurrection of the body, as do the Pharisees, in contrast to the more conservative Sadducees, who mock the idea.⁶³ As the Christian faith arises out of the witness to the resurrection of Jesus, the New Testament writers take pains to stress that the resurrected Jesus is no ghost or spirit but flesh and blood. That the same God who resurrected Jesus in the first century will in due course resurrect those who put their trust in him remains an essential Christian confession. Christianity has no use for the widespread conviction that we possess immaterial, immortal souls. In the natural course of events, the death of the body is the end of human life and existence. Christian hope is not in natural immortality but that the faithful God who miraculously resurrected Jesus will likewise resurrect us, bringing about what would never occur in the natural course of events.

⁶³ John’s Gospel records Martha speaking to Jesus about her dead brother, Lazarus: “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day” (John 11:24). All three synoptic Gospels relate the Sadducees’ attempt to discredit belief in resurrection by asking Jesus who a woman, married (sequentially) to seven brothers, will be married to when they are all resurrected (Matthew 22:23, Mark 12:18, Luke 20:27).