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Are People Born to be Believers, or are Gods Born to be Believed?

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Abstract

Proposals that god-belief is an innate capacity of all humanity have not been confirmed by empirical studies. Scientific disciplines presently lean against god-belief's innateness. Perhaps religion should be relieved that belief in gods is not innate. Intuitive cognitive functions supporting god-belief offer little convergence upon any god. Religious pluralism back to the Stone Age displays no consensus either. Any cognition for god-belief can only be deemed as mostly or entirely misleading. Theology has tried to forestall that skeptical judgment, by dictating what counts as authentic religiosity and who enjoys a valid idea of god. Justin Barrett exemplifies this theological interference with scientific inquiry. Contorting the anthropology and cognitive science of religion too far, his quest for a primal natural religion won't match up with his search for intuitive conceptions of god. His quest for god-belief's innateness devolves into theological dogmatism, deepening doubts that scientific theories of religion will validate god-belief.

Keywords

religion – science of religion – anthropology – cognitive science – theology – popular religion

Religiosity has been endemic across humanity, at least during the last quarter of *Homo sapiens*'s nearly 200 millennia duration, as far as indirect evidence can indicate. Kinds of religiosity that first developed in human cultures, and kinds of piety now preached by familiar religions, will probably not prove to

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be humanly innate. Biological innateness calls for stricter criteria than just duration, prevalence, or intuitiveness. Unlike the widely accepted view that religion's prevalence is supported in part by common psychological processes, religion's innateness is far from established, with little progress in sight (Banerjee et al. 2013). Despite that situation, asking "Are people born to be believers, or are gods born to be believed?" strikes many as presenting a false dichotomy. Affirming "Yes" to both questions strikes many people as the obvious answer. Perhaps that is why argumentative circularity advanced by religion's admirers has been disrupting inquiries into religion by many disciplines, from comparative religion and natural theology all the way to cultural anthropology and cognitive science. What gets counted as early signs of that innately human religiosity? Just the features of religiosity commonly familiar to most people today, of course. Why should today's common notions of religiosity direct the search for early religiosity? Because religiosity is humanly innate, of course.

To circumvent that vicious circle, disciplines should study biological, psychological, anthropological, archaeological, and historical evidence unfiltered by whatever seems presently essential to religions and religious people. Expertise in familiar religions is superfluous to scientific inquiry into religion's alleged innateness. Consulting experts on religion while exploring the psychology of religious people today makes good sense; letting religious expertise set parameters for what must count as religious psychology since humanity's origins makes poor sense. Psychology does matter, without question. If religiosity is innate, this hypothesis asserts, then it is supported by psychological proclivities that every human being, from the origin of the species, should use properly in order to be religious. Religion can pose hypotheses, but science must test them. Science is in the best position to objectively study religious psychology and religion's history, not religion. It may turn out that the scientific evidence leaves religion's innateness unconfirmable. Or, that evidence may confirm the innateness of a kind of very old religiosity that few religions still recognize as significantly religious. It might even turn out that religiosity enjoys an odd kind of innateness that only misleads people into believing in unreal matters—religion may be quite human, but always mistaken.

These alternatives are probably not what religions expect from the search for religion's naturality. Classifying belief in higher powers and supreme beings as entirely optional or even delusional is especially provocative, evoking strenuous objections from religion's admirers. Those objections are clearly heard in academic debates, and theology has not been a watchful observer. Theological intercessions try to preemptively guarantee religion's innateness and correctness by dictating what counts as religious god-belief and directing the evaluation of empirical evidence. That kind of interference, exemplified

in the work of Justin Barrett, is methodologically unsound. Objective science is not confirming that god-belief is biologically innate, although it is learning how religions can culturally propagate all the fictions people could want. The gods are conceived to be believable, but no one is born to be a religious believer in them.

1 Seeking Gods

Science may never find heavenly gods, but it can examine human religiosity. One proposal now under close scrutiny claims that human religiosity involves belief in gods. Many people, both religious and nonreligious, suppose that believing in one god or another is fairly essential to human religiosity. (Religious people needn't also have a belief *that* god is an existent thing, as if cognitive grounds support that proposition about god as an object; see Pyysiäinen 2015). Science won't be defining 'religion' and 'god', or relying on contested definitions from religious studies (Boyer 2010; Arnal and McCutcheon 2013), but the sciences can neutrally consider many proposals about how people think about various sorts of higher powers. Without affirming or denying that gods are real, or reducing religiosity to something it is not, science can offer its scrutiny of available evidence indicating how humans have thought about all sorts of gods. Can that evidence indicate why humanity believes in gods?

This article analyzes the controversial proposal that god-belief is humanly innate. For the purposes of this focused discussion, its premises are: (1) If religion is innate, then all people are normally born to be religious; and (2) A person normally born to be religious will usually place belief in god(s). This proposal enjoys a certain amount of common sense and some science behind it. Despite the paucity of evidence in the archaeological and historical record, it does appear that (3) Humans have long been placing belief in a vast variety of extraordinary beings. This proposal's advocates accordingly judge that this widespread belief in unnatural powers and agents shows that humans are born to place belief in gods. Unless there is a better explanation for that (near) universal propensity to believe in deities, premises 1-3 arrive at (4) The innateness for religion accounts for the way that humans are naturally and normally born to place belief in gods.

There are better explanations for popular god-belief than its innateness, as we shall see, so god-belief is hardly as valid as religious people like to think. Even if god-belief were innate, that couldn't validate god-belief either. Billions of people naturally believing in innumerable gods over many millennia is not sufficient to determine which, if any, of those gods are real. Not even religious

people think so. The sciences, philosophy, and the world's religions can all agree that (5) It is not true that all of those seemingly credible unnatural powers and agents are actually real just as believers take them to be. Hence, if religion is as innate as premise 4 says, then 1-5 reach a conclusion: (6) Religion's innateness provides for most or all people normally and naturally placing their belief in unreal gods. Even if some people happen to place their belief in god(s) that are real, religiosity's innateness cannot be credited for that luck, since it usually misleads god-believers.

Nothing scientific or philosophical sets up religion for failure here. Neither cognitive science, scientific naturalism, nor scientific support for religion's innateness (if such support is found), has any bearing on that skeptical result. Propositions 1-6 do not involve a presumption of naturalism, a plan to naturalize religion, or a proscription against supernaturalism. Neither premise 4 nor premise 5 are disguised proxies for atheism—atheism sternly says that no gods are real in order to express dismay at premise 4 and disagree with premise 5's humbler statement that not all gods are real. This skepticism towards innate god-belief is not coming from atheism's hostility or science's sterility, but from religiosity's prolificacy.

It is the case that science cannot help to mitigate this skepticism. If science is involved with confirming religion's innateness, it won't be additionally confirming which people are believing in real god(s), since that lies beyond science's competence (as religions often reiterate). The scientific approach to understanding religious cognition and psychology won't be at fault either. Regardless of whether god-belief is proposed as an adaptation naturally selected for its usefulness, as a by-product of adaptive features, or a by-product that later acquired utility, premises 1-5 suffice to yield skepticism. That skepticism is not a result of awarding premature victory to one specific hypothesis or another, or from assuming that no other access to divine matters is possible. If god-belief is epistemically reasonable on other grounds besides this allegedly innate religiosity about gods, theology must establish those arguments, not scientific psychology (Thurow 2013).

Philosophy won't settle matters here, either. Some philosophizing is useful with considering religion's innateness, but philosophy won't be deciding which people worship a real god. Proofs for god don't convince most philosophers and scientists, and the "gods" of the convinced philosophers rarely impress theologians or suffice for ordinary believers. What each religion really wants from religiosity's innateness is validation that its own god(s) ought to be believable by anyone and everyone. But that verdict is not forthcoming from propositions 1-5. From a religious standpoint, the gods of all the world's religions past and present, no matter how appealing many of them may seem, cannot all be real.

From a scientific/philosophical standpoint, even if god-belief is innate, there's no reasonable way for anyone to tell who might accurately believe in real god(s). The unknowable possibility that some believers have an acquaintance with god does not mean that most believers are probably right. They probably aren't. Innate religiosity, as far as any scientific/philosophical standpoint could say, normally and naturally leads to beliefs in nonexistent deities. And the alternative, that god-belief is not a matter of innateness, also leads to the estimation that cognition, as far as anyone could tell, isn't accurately guiding people towards deities. Either way, that skeptical conclusion rests as the default scientific view: no one is actually acquainted with any god thanks to their regular cognitive faculties, so far as anyone could tell, and belief in gods using those ordinary faculties cannot be deemed reliable.

Religion can contest that skeptical conclusion, but reversing it calls for more resources than religion can supply. Each god-believer feels confident in their faith in a god, of course. But pointing to all those devout believers trusting their own minds only heightens skepticism. How would religion help confirm which people (if any) may be believing in the real gods, so that innate religiosity can be about something real? Many religions aren't basically about deities, and a religion with god(s) expects them to be more real than gods of quite different religions. No religion encourages its followers to think that god-belief is humanly innate but they won't reach god. Nor could religion claim that the right god is the one that most people already innately believe in—that tactic only begs the question of god-belief's innateness. Religion as a whole cannot reverse the skeptical judgment that an innateness for god-belief yields ignorance about gods.

Only theology is left to intercede on behalf of religion to take control of this problem with innateness. Theology can either (a) argue that innate religiosity properly directs belief towards one religion's god(s), or (b) explain how innate religiosity at least guides belief towards god(s) fitting an abstract model of divinity shared by many religions. Dogmatic theology can undertake task (a), but there is nothing remotely scientific involved. Speculative theology along with comparative religious studies can undertake task (b), without ever consulting science. Many theologians are also tempted to conflate (a) and (b) by ensuring that an abstract model of divinity closely fits the deity of one religion (the theologian's religion, of course)—label this option (c) as parochial comparative theology. Parochial comparative theology can ignore science and design just the "right" model of divinity to overlap with what seems divine in other religions' doctrines. Alternatively, parochial comparative theology can blend that "right" model of divinity with carefully selected science in order to undertake (c) by way of designing (d) a parochial natural theology. That parochial

natural theology presents itself as science-driven, but doctrine instructs which hypotheses about religiosity are worthy of inquiry, because science cannot be left to its own mind on this matter.

Theological efforts to enlist science for confirming both innateness and accuracy for god-belief are critically examined in later sections. The next sections expose how religion easily distorts empirical inquiries into god-belief's innateness.

2 Birthing Gods and Raising Beliefs

An undeniable fact is that humans, in general across the species, are capable of conceiving and believing almost anything. That speaks to our imaginative fertility, and our susceptible credulity. Religions find a natural connection between a believable god and credulous believers, of course. Yet that bond apparently holds only so long as the 'right' sort of god is believed. Having direct acquaintance with what it is like to be a believer in a god worthy of belief, religious adherents find that evident believability of their worthy god to be undeniable. Religious adherents also naturally suppose that their own god(s) cannot owe their entire existence to people conjuring up stories about them. People making up all the gods and getting others to believe in them is a naturalistic scenario, not religious scenario. Perhaps that is why religions traditionally depict people as natural unbelievers who need startling anomalous convincing by a real deity. And religions, for their part, have never assumed that once babies are born, they will find the right god on their own, or that they will only believe the religious truths and not the many religious fictions. Each religion survives by generating cohort after cohort of believers that conform to a conviction in just its own real god(s).

Searching for a genuine deity amenable to most religions, and explaining why religious adherents are correct in their credulity about the divine, are undertakings better suited for theology. That is why scientific investigations into innate religiosity get paired up with theological quests for intrinsic divinity. Expecting people to normally be intuitive believers in some suitably abstract god has the tenor of theological liberality rather than religious conformity. Justin Barrett and Ian Church (2013) exemplify this stance in their defense of the naturality (and hence normality, in their view) of cognitive processes guiding many people to their beliefs in one god or another. They seek to insulate the field of Cognitive Science of Religion (surveyed by Pyysiäinen 2013; Watson and Turner 2014) from misinterpretations that inspire skepticism about the reliability god-belief. After making sure to accuse atheism for insinuating its

biased preconceptions into religious psychology, they praise CSR's accurate identification of cognitive processes for god-belief.

> [T]he findings of CSR do not suggest that specific religious beliefs, theologies, philosophies, and practices are the natural product of our cognitive faculties; it is not as if our cognitive faculties are geared toward specific beliefs in infant baptism, supralapsarianism, annihilationism, or anything of the like. Rather, the recent findings of CSR simply suggest that our cognitive faculties are naturally geared toward religious beliefs in general. And as such, the theist qua theist can affirm that the general and natural religious leanings of our cognitive faculties are veritic—dissolving any skeptical worries regarding the reliability of our faculties. (Barrett and Church 2013: 319)

We can expose the circular and theological character to their argument fairly easily.

First, Barrett and Church claim that our (humanly universal) cognitive faculties guide (all) people toward non-specific religious beliefs. CSR has not actually established that far-reaching hypothesis, as the next sections recount. But they think that CSR has achieved this feat, despite the way that belief in a theistic god is a fairly specific sort of religiosity for cognitive science and cultural anthropology. Secondly, Barrett and Church pointedly deny that theism is so specific, instead taking it to be common to religion. That is why they overlook the large portion of the world's population that is not theistic, and they ignore how theism isn't so essential to many religions past and present. Their prior conviction that theism is so religiously normal for humanity is the real basis for their first claim (not CSR's empirical discoveries), thus begging the question. Third, what exactly is this essential yet suitably vague theism? In the real world of religious followers, what is most uncommon is devout conviction in some vague god. (What speculative theologians like to pray to, if many still devoutly pray to a god who listens, is another matter.) Barrett and Church ignore religious realities by relying on the theological assertion that a certain vague notion of god resides within *every* god-believer's devotion. Who gets to decide what that vaguely conceived god is like? Theologians eagerly advising scientific inquiries usually offer a vaguely Christian god, of course. And every human being can truly know this god, and in some sense all already do, according to Barrett and Church. All these presuppositions are entirely in the realm of theological apologetics, distant from anything scientific.

Wouldn't it be miraculous if all humanity can know the true god? If this approach by Barrett and Church were somehow sound, then the following

reasoning must also be accepted: Our cognitive faculties are geared towards detecting causes of a non-specific sort; observing miraculous events is a non-specific kind of way to detect causes; so humanity is supposed to normally observe real miracles, despite the skepticism of doubters who don't think we observe any actual miracles. This defense of miracles is clearly unsound: it is more reasonable to doubt that humanity is utilizing its cognitive faculties for reliably believing in real miracles. Barrett and Church's unsound position on god-belief expects each brain to think about higher powers so vaguely that all humanity should particularly commit to theism. That contradictory expectation illustrates how theology's manipulations contort scientific hypotheses into pliable platitudes.

Sciences of religion accepting guidance from theology must question whether they are trying to explain the inculcated convictions prevalent among dominant religions, or the intellectual abstractions promulgated by theological speculations. Or, sciences of religion can refocus on the task of identifying all the different god-beliefs of humans from Stone Age times down to the present, to acquire proper perspective on the question of god-belief's naturality.

3 Natural Belief

What has come to light about our genetic heritage, psychological processes, and cortical structures tends to suggest that god-belief is largely molded by the socialization of one's culture rather than any underlying common nature. In their recent book *A Natural History of Natural Theology*, De Cruz and De Smedt assess the current situation:

> Religious beliefs and practices require cultural input for their development, more so than exemplar maturationally natural skills like walking and chewing. Children obviously do not reinvent or spontaneously come up with full-blown religious beliefs such as those found among practicing Christians or Hindus. But even at a more elementary level, there is little empirical support for the widespread idea that appeal to supernatural entities is the cognitive default. (De Cruz and De Smedt 2014: 38)

Nevertheless, circular arguments for god-belief's innateness remain common. They usually boil down to this: Humanity's long-standing interest in god-belief (which hasn't been proven) points to its innateness in all members of our species, while humanity's universal belief in gods (which isn't accurate) is best

explained by our ancient facility with conceiving them.[1] The claims made by this unsound argument are not well-supported by available knowledge, either.

Our ancient facility with god-belief is not in clear evidence. Bands of Stone Age hunter-gatherers likely included shaman-like practitioners and/or myth storytellers (Witzel 2012; Wightman 2014). Yet we can't expect, without begging the question of religion's innateness, that everyone was a believer in spirits and gods in the same way or to the same degree. Anthropology has had to struggle against the imposition of theocentrism, the view that religion typically revolves around the deeds and desires of a high god. It is more common for people around the world to vary widely in their religious interests, their credulity about spiritual matters, and their conception of unnatural beings (Descola 2013). As for universal affinity, a significant portion of the world's population lacks god-belief, and religions work far harder at religious indoctrination and conformity concerning gods than would be expected if a natural affinity for god-belief were universally innate. Individual children able to project mentality, causality, and purpose into the world around them are only a small beginning, far from anything like the complex conceptions of deities worshipped by millions. For example, detecting possible agents nearby (like a dangerous predator) is a smart way to stay alive, even if you are frequently mistaken. However, suspecting that a tiger lurks in the trees is not similar to thinking that an invisible tiger spirit infuses a talisman, or that an immaterial 'duplicate' of a person resides within each of us. Envisioning how late Homo erectus, Homo neanderthalensis, or early Homo sapiens were spotting gods in storms, chasing woodland fairies, or fearing demons and ghosts is just diverting fantasy.

It is undeniable that the highly inventive and repeatedly embellished tales of about unnatural matters can propagate with remarkable efficiency among the young and remain popular among adults. However, that efficient propagation depends heavily on carefully adjusted cultural factors and family dynamics. Not coincidentally, religions busily adjust social conditions and family settings to strongly favor religious inculcation and devout god-belief. Religious communities complain most bitterly if deprived of socialization and educational control over their children. Religions rely most heavily on intuitive/unconscious cognitive biases and propensities favoring social emotions and group-think to ensure that large populations of adults remain convinced about the ontological confusions and paranatural purposes constituting god-belief (Willard and Norenzayan 2013; Lindeman et al. 2015). The religious facility of birthing and raising up gods evidently requires a village, not just a lone brain.

1 Warnings against this circular reasoning have been heard; see Pyysiainen (2003), Kirkpatrick (2006), and Fondevila and Martín-Loeches (2013).

Religions do take natural advantage of many basic cognitive/social/affective processes, both conscious and unconscious, and several important pattern-recognition and inferential habits. That wide psychological range for persuasive religiosity includes many mental processes which can make intuitive sense but they have less-than-reliable reputations. The human brain is easily attracted to convincing illusions, erroneous judgments, hasty presumptions, optimistic expectations, and credulous conformity. The intersection of cognitive science and behavioral ecology is discerning why we are all prone to many cognitive biases and distortions, and susceptible to attractive views of the world built from our illusions (Hammerstein and Stevens 2012; Hutson 2012).

A typical cognitive bias, by itself, can have limited utility under specific contextual circumstances. That's why human brains still deploy them. However, it is always fallacious to assume that concatenating many biases and forcing them to perform together under generalized conditions would similarly yield cognitive utility. How would an individual's exaggerated susceptibility to multiple cognitive distortions somehow add up to an innate ability to accurately think about something real? A similar case in human psychology would be difficult to find. We again come back to rest on the default skeptical conclusion that the religiosity of god-belief is either innately deceptive, or god-belief is not innate so religions must amplify cognitive error.

Religion's advocates try to avoid this dilemma about god-belief's innateness by appealing to hypotheses pronounced in memorable and easily-repeated tales, amounting to "just-so" stories. Here's another oft-told version. Religion is so natural for everyone that we must be made for it, and we wouldn't be made for it unless religiosity is about something real, so there must be particular human capacities devoted to guiding people towards god-belief. And those special capacities are already evident, if we would look in the right place, within the psychological and neurological make-up of authentic religious people already attuned to god. It's one of those pleasing tales where all the pieces fit just right. Who really counts as enjoying authentic religiosity, of course, has to be predetermined in advance of any scientific inquiry, since the entire human population displays far too much diversity of opinion concerning unnatural beings. Born believers have to be specially made.

4 Who are Born Believers?

Justin Barrett's book *Born Believers: The Science of Children's Religious Belief* describes his view that god-belief is naturally innate as follows:

> Children aren't born singing or painting or shooting a turn-around jump shot, but these expressions mean that babies are born with capabilities that will—if given minimal opportunity and cultural support—unfold in such a way as to produce mastery in singing, art, or basketball. In a related (but not identical) way, essentially all human babies are born talkers—destined to acquire language—and born walkers—naturally going to learn to walk. In a similar way, children are born believers in some kind of god. Children are prone to believe in supernatural beings such as spirits, ghosts, angels, devils, and gods during their first four years of life due to ordinary cognitive development in ordinary human environments. (2012: 3)

Barrett is claiming that ordinary socialization will easily produce children who appreciate a god as an explanation, and that this has been going on across humanity for a very long time. Are these claims accurate, and if they are, do they really support god-belief's naturality?

Without denying that socialization of the young is essential to religiosity, it should be seriously doubted whether religiosity should be categorized with walking and talking, or even singing and artistry. Religious expression takes advantage of far older human capacities for singing, dancing, ritual, artistry, and narrative. The earliest beginnings of religiosity were probably indistinguishable from such symbolic and engaging activities, even as some humans began acting out religious ideas concerning human-world relationships. A mimetic culture only using gutterals, gesturing, and mimicry could not develop or transmit ideas about beings quite unlike familiar things in the environment. (Try to convey "lives in the sky forever" or "can never be seen by anyone" using just mimetic communication.) We mustn't project our educated ideas of 'god' back into the minds limited by mimetic culture. Mimesis could have sufficed for early humans to attend to nature's powers and nurturing bounties, bonding through commonalities between animals and humans, and ritually participating in environing cycles of life, but little more than that (Bellah 2011:120-135). This obstacle is not about their raw intelligence. Let us grant equivalent intellectual faculties, and imaginations alert for the modestly paranatural. No matter how clever or imaginative, there was no one in an entirely mimetic culture who was thinking, "If only I had better speech to tell others about my idea of an invisible powerful person who lived before earth was created and makes the sun go across the sky every day."

The invention of full language permitted the human imagination to imagine and develop descriptions about invisible powerful beings behind the observable ways of nature. A developed religion involving abstract conceptions

of amazing powers and plans of hard-to-detect spirits, super-human ancestors, heavenly deities (and the like), capable of getting transmitted accurately across generations, requires full language: large vocabulary, adequate grammar, negative propositions, metaphorical phrasing, and so on. Religious god-belief, while scaffolded on mimetic pantomime and ritual about paranatural matters, would not be older than the practices of narration and storytelling which blossomed during humanity's "cultural explosion" between 90,000 and 50,000 years ago.[2] By the late Stone Age, mythic practitioners were creatively describing (each in their own way) distinctions between the body from the 'inner' person, expectations about 'spirits' or 'souls' (as we label them) doing deeds in this world and the next, and stories about powerful gods creating and managing nature. However the actual chronology to those religious conceptions is eventually arranged by further studies, god-belief is surely much younger than the human species, and probably contemporaneous with its characteristic cultural achievements. Crediting god-belief with innate naturality to all of humanity thanks to our species' initial cognitive abilities is looking quite dubious.

Barrett's hypothesis for god-belief's innateness would be better supported by evidence about the intrinsic cognitive plausibility of god-belief, rather than god-belief's actual formative history. He does express confidence in that plausibility. Why does he think that any untrained child can think up a god as an explanation for things they can see around them? Barrett (2004:30-33) adopted the hypothesis that we all have a cognitive proclivity to "see" agents at work, due to our innate "agency detection device." This cognitive 'module', as it has been often labeled, busily imposes agency on dynamic events. If it is only a short step from thinking that a non-yet-visible agent is nearby to the different thought that a never-visible 'person' is up to something, then this "agency detector" can acquire a religious purpose over and above its worldly functionality. Barrett's view is that religiosity heavily relies on a "hyperactive agency detection device" among our cognitive processes. So long as alternative cognitive processes (such as analytic reasoning) or unfavorable social contexts (adults who aren't religious, for example) do not override or stunt this religious

2 Scientific accounts of religion's origins are typically amenable to rough chronological range; see Geertz (2013) and Wightman (2014). Merlin Donald (1991) influentially theorized about the continuities between mimetic culture and linguistic culture. See Boyd (2009) and Fitch (2010) on the evolution of human communication and language. On culture's basis in evolution and culture's development, also consult Richerson and Boyd (2008), Schaller and Norenzayan (2010), and Hatfield and Pittman (2013).

capacity, Barrett supposes, early childhood religiosity would typically mature into lifelong adult religiosity.[3]

Seeking out adaptive cognitive modules for religiosity is by no means CSR's only or main strategy (Schloss and Murray 2009; Geertz 2010; Van Slyke 2011), and better models of cognition should be applied (Oviedo 2015). However, this kind of hyperactivity to a cognitive process is not so unusual, and the prevalence of over-extended psychological processes could explain much about religion. We, no less than early humans, routinely think about all sorts of nonexistent matters. We see causality most everywhere instead of just coincidence; we detect things done to us when only accidents occur; we intuit what matters when no facts back it up; we suffer from anxiety about improbable or imagined future events; we feel picked out for special status when only luck is involved; we think we succeed at something when we really don't do much; and so on. A list of common distortions, misperceptions, biases, prejudices, and judgment errors has turned out to be lengthy (Kahneman 2002; Hutson 2012). That is why religions can imaginatively enlarge upon tendencies to think about unseen agents and events by playing upon many other psychological distortions and diversions. Barrett's version of the agency-detection hypothesis about religiosity's origins and development has some plausibility in light of current understandings about psychological functioning and social development. However, this hypothesis does nothing to mitigate that skeptical verdict against religion's accuracy about god. Religious thinking about unnatural agents results from stressing ordinary cognitive abilities beyond their normal functioning, and religion must override other cognitive abilities with additional cognitive stress and social pressure in order to sustain conviction in spirits and deities (Atran and Heinrich 2010). Neither normality nor reliability could automatically attach to god-belief in this manner, so god-belief ends up looking culturally artificial rather than biologically natural.

Barrett seems oblivious to these concerns. By comparing religiosity to walking, talking, playing, singing, and artistry, he pushes well beyond offering a hypothesis about a socialized capacity to develop thinking like adults do about adult matters. He deliberately associates god-belief with capacities not only common to our humanity, but also quite old in evolutionary terms, perhaps older than *Homo sapiens*. Minimizing the rival theory that religion has propagated through cultural invention and social transmission, Barrett argues

3 Barrett's detection of young children's appreciation for superhuman minds has been challenged (Lane et al. 2010), and children raised in nonreligious homes easily grasp what is just fiction (Corriveau et al. 2015).

that religion relies on enculturalization only for developing innate capacities "meant" for god-belief.

We are now invited to ponder two divergent scenarios. Does a mere touch of generic socialization let loose nearly fully-developed ideas about gods in the small child's mind? Or, does the socialization into a specific religious culture heavily control the origin and development of concrete religious conceptions far more complex than anything innately possible from a child? Interestingly, Barrett's theological goals trap his theory in a theoretical dilemma. Barrett prefers the first scenario so he can point to the innateness of a singular idea of a god, yet he relies on the second scenario when he has to account for that broad diversity to conceptions of divinity among the world's religions. Thinking that these two scenarios are compatible only gets harder to justify the more god-belief is taken to be humanly natural.

5 Knowing God, Naturally

Barrett's theory that god-belief is humanly natural cannot evade the skeptical problem that cognition for god-belief is either innately deceptive, or god-belief is not innate so religions must amplify cognitive error. On his theory, each religion selectively enhances, represses, and/or supplements features of those innate god-ideas that children will naturally and naively generate on their own. This is particularly true of creedal and doctrinal religions as they carefully regulate how adherents think of their god(s). Religions modified and modulated by theological sophistications—nearly every religion on the planet younger than about 5,000 years old—must be less natural religions since they conform less to the naturally innate ideas of god produced by the naïve mind, if Barrett's reasoning is followed (2012: 136-140). This sorting of religions into "more natural" and "less natural" religions won't make much sense from a scientific standpoint, but Barrett insists on assigning the label "natural." If one must apply such terminology (and science shouldn't), either religions are natural, or they are mainly artificial. If one credits naturality to all forms of god-belief, those forms can't all be veridical. If artificiality better characterizes every form of god-belief, those forms proliferate by inflating undue credulity into non-veridicality. Either way, skepticism about god-belief's accuracy is the result.

Barrett temporarily dodges this question of more and less natural religions, and the skeptical verdict that attends it, by advocating "the" natural religion. According to Barrett's *Born Believers* (chap. 6) there is one primal natural religion. This natural religion consists of innate ideas about a superhuman being with its own mind, an unpredictable will, and extraordinary powers to design

natural things, many of which are bestowed with their own extraordinary powers. Additionally, this natural religion includes two more ideas: moral norms are unchangeable, and people can survive death. Barrett quickly adds that this natural religion can't be identified anywhere in the world in this simple form, because each religion elaborates and re-designs all of these features in endless specific variations.

Barrett's "natural" religion (that nowhere naturally exists) is intelligently designed to be the core of pure and true religion. Tolerant-minded Protestants have proposed this sort of theology for several centuries. Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1624) declared that common belief is the ultimate test of truth, so "deism" covers the five religious tenets enjoying universal consent (or so he thought) among all peoples. His tenets were these: there is a supreme God, worthy of worship, who expects steady virtue and regret for vice, and ensures a justly earned afterlife for each person. The first Protestant theologian to emphasize the term "natural religion" was Bishop John Wilkins, whose treatise *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion* (1675) argued that the natural faculties of every person are sufficient to think of, and believe in, a creator god who enforces an inviolable morality and promises immortality. Aside from Barrett's admission of more animism and polytheism than Christianity ever embraced, his twenty-first century discernment of natural religion in naïve minds matches seventeenth century Protestant expectations.[4]

Having credited naïve children with innate beliefs about gods (that don't evidently sound like the gods of adults) that accurately generate the pure religion (that isn't evident in actual religions), Barrett leaves science even further behind in his quest for that true religion disguised within actual religion. If this "natural religion" is genuinely innate, the first religious humans would have had it. Barrett's luck continues: there's no evident sign of it in humanity's history. The oldest myths that can be discerned by comparing the surviving religions of indigenous peoples (Witzel 2012: 357-74) are already richly complex, but they do not conform to supernatural deism. Barrett is not wrong for regarding ideas about deities in the sky, busy demi-gods on earth, anthropomorphic spirit-animals, and reincarnating souls as extremely old ideas, yet they are far more elaborate than childish notions of unseen personalities. If there was such a thing as even earlier primal religion that sprang into every early human's thoughts, there's little evidence that it meets Barrett's definition of natural religion, and no explanation why it would be occluded until revived by Protestants.

4 De Roover (2014) recounts how the quest for a naturally universal religion animated seventeenth and eighteenth century theology across Christianity. On religious contexts to the emergence of deism, consult Harrison (1990).

The difficulties to matching up a cognitively reliable mode of god-belief displayed by children with a natural religion somehow displayed by actual religions are becoming insurmountable. Barrett's theoretical dilemma still looms. Must his theory ecumenically credit all religions with (roughly) the same natural adequacy about the supernatural—despite each religion's constrictions favoring specific deities so unlike anything children will loosely describe without promptings? Alternatively, does his theory require that unscripted intuitive god-belief is quite reliable about the divine—so that this naïve accommodation of rampant anthropomorphism and disorganized polytheism is the more natural religion for humanity? What Barrett needs to make the first claim plausible, a disguised "natural religion" lurking within today's actual religions, is precisely what the second claim cannot deliver. Likewise, what Barrett needs to make the second claim plausible, that spontaneous god-belief characterizing humanity's primeval religion, might resemble religiosity's distant origins without looking much like the formulaic doctrines of Barrett's "natural religion." Theorizing how the first religious humans went straight to deistic supernaturalism is just fantasy, no matter how intuitive that kind of religion feels for many people today, as no historical or scientific evidence supports that hypothesis.

In summary so far, Barrett's determination to link the intuitive naturality of religion with its universal normalcy and reliability for humanity leaves that theoretical stance mired in irresolvable tensions. Sharing that determination leads to a dilemma: (a) take childish intuitive religiosity most seriously, thereby crediting it with high reliability about divine matters and exposing the world's religions as errantly deceptive; or (b) take the prevalence of religions across humanity most seriously, thereby crediting the immensely inventive diversity to human religiosity and discrediting the quest for some singular primeval religion at the heart of it all.

Philosophically, we can observe how this triad of innateness, normalcy, and reliability to god-belief are extremely difficulty to stably unite if available evidence is taken seriously. Single features or pairs of features can reach stability, through science or religion. Cultural anthropology may confirm normalcy without also discerning innateness or reliability, and cognitive science may confirm innateness while leaving normalcy and reliability as open questions about god-belief. Working together, cultural anthropology and cognitive science may support both innateness and normalcy for god-belief but not reliability (that's the skeptical verdict). Comparative religious studies lent support to conjoining innateness with normalcy while abandoning that single mountaintop where any religion was supposed to find the same supreme being. Speculative theology can combine normalcy and reliability by crediting the

divine with leading an otherwise clueless humanity towards it. Alternatively, speculative theology could combine innateness and reliability by crediting god with selectively guiding a subset of humanity to accurate god-belief while the majority remain errant as normal.

What about natural theology's parochial attempt to establish the universal innateness of a specific sort of god-belief? So long as parochial natural theology expects scientific confirmation, as our analysis of Barrett's attempt in *Born Believers* has shown, it won't be able to jointly deliver innateness, normalcy, and reliability. Only dogmatic theology is left to take up that task of dictating all religious terms to humanity. A mutation into dogmatic theology is an abiding temptation for parochial natural theology. Barrett willingly surrenders to that temptation in *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology: From Human Minds to Divine Minds*. There he appeals to a doctrine of evangelical theology, the Calvinist *sensus divinitatis* sensitized only to the true god (2011: 161), as the faithful substitute for that naïve agency-detection ability proving too complicit with wrong sorts of religions. Is the normal capacity for an innate acquaintance with the true god firmly implanted within every human being? This doctrinal thesis far transcends any scientific hypothesis, displaying how natural theology will revert back to dogmatic theology when reliable god-belief is at stake. Inserting a singular theological doctrine into the search for primal religiosity couldn't look scientific. Unable to appeal any longer to anything scientific, however, Barrett promptly asserts on the same page that many theologies, such as those of Islam and Hinduism, recognize this same divine sense.

Identifying John Calvin's *sensus divinitatis* as a component to many theologies is by no means an easy accomplishment. Even from Christian perspectives, Catholicism has serious objections to this divine sense and parochial comparative religion leans against privileging one sense of ultimate reality (Greco 1997; Hick 1980). Islamic theology on the human need to apprehend god does not duplicate Protestantism's account (Baldwin 2010), Hinduism is by no means uniform on the subject of religious yearnings (Barua 2015), and rest of the world's theological religions won't fall in line any more easily. How would the notion of a *sensus divinitatis* be extracted from the theologies of Mayan religion, Roman religion, African Ubuntu, Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, Buddhism, *and* Taoism?

The absence of a developed theology in most of the world's ancient and indigenous religions could not be license for a contemporary theology to superimpose its own doctrinal view upon all of them. Presuming that any theology must acknowledge this "divine sense" in order to account for devout religiosity only begs the question of god-belief's innateness. Besides, a broad agreement about this "innate sense of the divine" presumes a consensus about the divine

among religious people, which is no more in evidence than a conformity of religious opinion with theological correctness (Slone 2004). The world's theologies won't be confirming the reliability of this "sense of the divine" for the faithful. Barrett may never notice. Rather than relying on outcomes from ecumenical theology, he surely expects those formulaic doctrines of "natural religion" to dwell within every adequate theology about the truly divine.

Conclusion

Parochial natural theology keeps up the pretense of incorporating scientific findings about human religiosity, but parochial fidelities distort scientific inquiries. To guarantee that the right religion must be naturally reliable, dogmatists eventually reveal their presuppositions. Barrett serves as a cautionary example. This parochial distillation of select theologies about human nature and the supernatural is best classified as a professedly Christian anthropology (Farris and Taliaferro 2015).

Sciences of religion can avoid these theological entanglements. Scientific disciplines can study biological, psychological, anthropological, archaeological, and historical evidence using scientific methodologies undistorted by views important to religious adherents and religion experts beholden to parochial outcomes. In particular, searching for god-belief's innateness can be undertaken scientifically, but science mustn't be reproached for remaining dubious about god-belief's innateness and skeptical about god-belief's reliability.

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