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Reply to Commentaries on "Are People Born to be Believers, or are Gods Born to be Believed?"

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Abstract

The four commentaries on my article "Are People Born to be Believers, or are Gods Born to be Believed?" only indirectly address my main argument that god-belief is not an innate (natural, normal, and so on) capacity of all humanity. Although scientific disciplines dispute criteria for innate biological functions, there remains little scientific evidence of an inherent capacity to our species for getting acquainted with any deity. Theologies looking to science may hope that the right sort of god best fits the right sort of brain. Methodologies for scientifically studying religion should not be in-fluenced by such normative presumptions.

Keywords

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

I am grateful to the authors of the four responses to my paper (this volume) asking, "Are People Born to be Believers, or are Gods Born to be Believed?" I am also grateful to readers reaching my reply, who may be wondering how a siege against cognitive science of religion or religion's naturalness could regain momentum. But my article defends sound cognitive science and anthropology of religion, on the single topic of gods. It nowhere denies that many forms of religiosity appear to be naturally endemic to most of humanity. My focus is instead on the considerable body of scientific research unable to confirm that humanity naturally cognizes deities. This situation evidently frustrates

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scholars indebted to religious studies and theology, but it couldn't be ignored forever. Theology takes close interest in alleged *unnatural* acquaintances with god(s), so theology's forays into science and science of religion do merit rigorous scrutiny. Examinations into theoretical blends of science and religion are not ruled out of order simply because they can fruitfully inform each other. My objections are not directed at their dialogue, but the disguise of religious dogma as scientific fact.

Philosophy's intrusion of sharp analysis into dominant paradigms is rarely welcomed. Where religion is involved, paradigms are treated with a level of deference and sensitivity unmatched almost anywhere else in academia. Even the largely agreeable response from Julie Exline, David Bradley, Alex Uzdavines, and Nick Stauner turns a sharp corner to deliver a final section-length shaming about bluntness and tone. They pick out concise expressions of argumentative goals, such as "God-belief is hardly as valid as religious people like to think," as if those were my stubborn biases. My premises are actually drawn from basic points about religion and science of religion, so a review of my main argument is in order.

Logical arguments wielded for critical effect only cut apart positions, exposing genuine relations among their components and revealing what can be inferred and what cannot. Logic cannot dictate labels or deter longings. My commentators only sporadically grapple with my article's argument, foraying into the search for a precise meaning to "innate" in particular, and the quest for a sympathetic study of religiosity in general. I regard both ventures as worthy in themselves and contributory to science of religion. But they are no substitute for a philosophical investigation into methodological procedures applied to the question of god-belief's naturality and normality for humanity.

Assigning the label of "innate" for what is regarded as natural, normal, inherent, inborn, and/or intuitive is hardly new, and nothing original appears in my article about that. My commentators are able to mention these and more synonyms besides, in their replies to me and in their own writings. And they appear to agree with me that neither deep antiquity nor current popularity suffices for fulfilling such concepts. All the same, lexicography isn't logic. If readers happen to agree that religious "innateness" is a poor label for the view that god-belief comes with being entirely human, they may pick some other label, and my critical analysis is unaffected. God-belief is not inherent to being human, so far as science can say, and no one is rendered unnatural or abnormal for irreligious disinterest in unnatural deities, despite the multitudes who have longed for gods. Setting aside commentators' sketches of longstanding disciplinary struggles over criterial definitions, and synopses of current disciplinary interest in religiosity's attractions, this response stays focused on what

my article attempted to prove. I am gratified that its argumentative verdict stands unscathed.

The specific position analyzed by my article holds that each human being, by virtue of being human, is naturally and normally born to place belief in god(s). Taking this kind of religiosity to be innate (the reader can substitute another term if 'innate' won't do) would be bolstered by scientific confirmation that humanity naturally cognizes deities. To naturally cognize a god using a well-functioning cognitive capacity, some accuracy is required. No properly functioning cognitive ability normally and nearly universally arouses false belief. (Proffered counter-examples need a second look. Anyone could naively take the clear sky to be a high dome, for example, but human optical capacities aren't functioning for judging distance in that direction.) Many ordinary cognitive functions regularly impel mistaken ideas; cognitive biases and deceptions populate anyone's thoughts. But the heavens are not really populated by all, or even many, of the gods that religious people contemplate. These basic points appear to be admitted by my commentators.

In consequence, even if one of the innumerable gods ever worshipped by humanity is actually real, any human cognizing that god would simply enjoy incredible luck. That lucky cognitive process could not be described as "well-functioning," nor could we infer that humanity is "supposed" to normally rely on that singular cognitive process. Therefore, no well-functioning cognitive ability possessed by humanity can be credited by science with accurately cognizing any god. The primary purpose of my article is hence fulfilled. It is necessary to note here that this conclusion is not that god-belief is "irrational" or intellectually "vicious," to repeat Justin Barrett's wording. If my article mounted a solely epistemic rejection of knowledge of God, that terminology might come into play (see Shook 2015). When science has only a negative answer to theology's optimism about the intellect's powers to know god, our actual powers should not be deemed unreasonable, unless we encourage ourselves to think we know more than we do.

Let us therefore move on to the second stage of my article where we observe theology demanding a positive scientific role. My argument would be weak if humanity, from religion's early origins, has not been placing belief in a large variety of deities. Peruse any multi-volume compendium of religion. Has humanity's religiosity, across so many regions and continents and hundreds of centuries, really been devoutly directed towards a few gods or maybe a single god? Some of my commentators, and many more scholars across religious studies and theology, seem intrigued by that idea. The view that God can have a thousand names is not uncommon, and oft-heard among theological religions pretending to universal validity. Even more common is the theological opinion

that most of humanity has been idolatrously wrong about the One True God. Proof of a real god's existence would also weaken my argument, but premising a mocked-up deity is hardly scientific. To presume that much or most of humanity is actually cognizing pretty much the same god is a falsifiable (and falsified) claim inspired by religion, not a scientific fact. To presume that some portion of humanity regularly cognizes an existing specific god is a theological hope, not a scientific hypothesis.

As my article sufficiently justifies the rejection of those presumptions to conduct science of religion, we may put matters more bluntly here. If I am completely wrong about theology's infusion of dogma into scientific inquiries into religion, we would not observe scholars repeatedly using the word God as if it had a clear and univocal meaning, or scholars faulting humanity's weaknesses for failing to appreciate God, or scholars inferring from religion's prevalence that humanity seeks the divine in the same way, or scholars assuming that human interest in divine revelation implies divinity's interest in revelation. Revealingly, three of the four replies illustrate such theological maneuvers, so the remainder of this brief response addresses their highlights.

Lluis Oviedo expressly defends monotheistic theology's discriminating interest in selected aspects of the scientific study of religiosity. His accusation that my stance is the reductivist one cannot be right, since my argument only sees that not all worshipped gods are real, whereas he upholds but one real god. Perhaps there is a real god like Aquinas's Christian God, and perhaps not—but Oviedo shows no interest in quite different deities. And he takes revelation (in the Christian tradition, at least) to be authentic without adequately justifying that view, while classifying my skepticism about revelation as the fallacious view. There is no fallacy, for my part, since my article's argument is different, only premised on the point that *religions themselves* deny that all of humanity's revelatory experiences are equally valid. If Oviedo suspects otherwise, he may have to re-consider his own tradition, as well as my argument. Skepticism towards revelation was not invented by the first scientists or atheists to boldly speak up.

As for Oviedo's overall impressions of my worry about theology's oversized role in cognitive science of religion, I can easily perceive why he cannot share that worry. He informs us, at the end of section (b), that cognitive science's inquiries into any innateness to religiosity have only a modest degree of relevance for theology. After all, as he tells us in his concluding paragraph, theology is not troubled by the question of God's existence, but only by humanity's difficulties recognizing this God. Oviedo's perspective is quite understandable. No creedal monotheism is surprised by the ignorance and intransigence of humanity, delaying its congregation into the One True Church. If science of religion at most

confirms that humanity's ordinary cognitive abilities only arouse suggestive and attractive ideas about deities, creedal monotheisms are pleased to take over the matter from there. After all, theology hardly trusts naïve religiosity, preferring to indoctrinate children and monitor adult conformity.

Creedal monotheism is not the only sort of theology to assign vast importance to the careful socialization of religious followers. Those expecting humanity to possess an inherent capacity for vague theism also have account for the immense variety to adult god-belief. As I have said, my article sets to one side the broad claim that religion is innate, so Barrett mistakes my specific goal and offers red-herrings about the term "innate." Barrett next composes lists of other scholars on religion and their personal stances, as if my worries about theology rested on polling the discipline instead of exposing difficulties with positions like Barrett's. But instead of focusing on those difficulties, Barrett digests his version of the naturalness hypothesis, innocently enough, and next offers a reading of my primary argument that he is capable of following. I leave it to readers to judge comparisons. More interestingly, he then proceeds in later sections to illustrate the sorts of theological maneuvers that science of religion should be more wary about.

A theological stance searching for natural god-belief has to overcome *religion*'s skepticism as much as any epistemic agnosticism. (Barrett, like Oveido, erects a straw man about my procedure.) Establishing some sort of god-belief inherent to human cognitive capacities on firmly scientific grounds must grapple with a difficult question. Does that vast religious diversity about gods imply a generic cognitive capacity for merely placing belief, or does that diversity imply some accurate understanding of a generic god? Each religion (having any god) has no use for generics anywhere—only a specific conviction in the actual deity (or pantheon) suffices—and followers are instructed accordingly. If a scholar cannot (blatantly) take one religion to be better acquainted with the divine, this dilemma stands: either god-belief is plentiful but misguided, or god-belief is guided but not so plentiful. Either way, humanity as a whole does not appear to be naturally cognizing deities.

Barrett senses this dilemma, but manages to get impaled on both horns. When Barrett wants to make generic god-belief a plausibly natural matter, he accuses me of ignoring how easy it is to induce people into one religion or another (but my article *elaborately agreed*). When Barrett wants to make religious people seem reasonable for believing in their god, he accuses me of unreasonably denying all gods (but he can't discern who is worshipping a *real god*). Erecting a suitably abstract deity, vague enough for any human's intellect while god-like enough for most major religions, is the tempting (but theological) leap over the dilemma's horns. Barrett doesn't disavow this strategy in

his reply. I therefore continue to deny that anything but current science and common sense animates my arguments, while maintaining that Barrett's maneuvers only ensnare his procedure more deeply in theology. Of course theologians can selectively learn from science of religion; our concern is whether science of religion must methodically rely on theological views.

Benjamin Purzycki sets out to defend Barrett's theory, but he first surveys incidences of "innate" and debates over detecting "innateness." I must forebear any further remarks about that diversion. Purzycki next rejects crediting just "culture" for religion rather than god-belief's naturalness. My article isn't based on that dichotomy, agreeing that religious worldviews are largely rooted in inherent (but fallible) cognitive proclivities strongly selected for and shaped by cultural development. Yet Purzycki must tear apart what he would join together. Is there really so much about religious commitment that isn't cultural at all? If he wants to focus on isolatable cognitive functions, of the sort young children might display towards other minds, in order to suggest that religions aren't just making everything up, he gets impaled on the first horn of that dilemma. Such varied generic agent-belief is not good evidence of an inherent cognitive ability to understand divinity. Purzycki admits how Barrett conflates ideas of invisible friends with ideas of gods. That conflation is far more controversial than the expectation that people can blend their personal inspirations with social expectations (an ability that I do not find controversial).

With regard to the form of religiosity that a child happens to encounter, Purzycki runs into the other horn of the dilemma. Can culture really be set aside for the purposes of scientific inquiry into religion? Asking a child whether God knows the contents of a box presumes that the child has some notion of this "God" and its usual powers. Which god, again? Surely it is the God that this child has already been socialized into contemplating. This experiment wouldn't work so well for a child raised in an entirely secular society, or a child living in the Congo region 40,000 years ago. (Unless one dogmatically posits theism's ubiquity, revelation's efficiency, or the *sensus divinitatis*, for example). It is circular to posit just the right "intuitive" idea and then design an experiment to "naturally" elicit that idea. It is natural, though, for a religion to be uninterested in everyone else's imaginary friends.

No one indeed should still be debating whether religion is just innate or just cultural. What deserves more debate is whether assembling a natural account of all forms of god-belief is getting diverted into a quest for a religious account of all people naturally believing in God. Readers warming to that debate but tiring of all that dilemma-talk may now be thinking, "Why can't science of religion drop the whole issue of whose notions of gods are more normal, or who is more natural for having or lacking god-belief?" That's my

wish, exactly, but this academic debating remains murky. If Barrett, Purzycki, or Oveido do not think that god-belief should be regarded as innate, or they doubt that commitment to a god is naturally normal for all humanity, why can't they tell us? One might suspect that they have other audiences in mind.

If humanity is so cognitively prepared for entertaining specific god-ideas, then we'd expect to find few nontheists and see most religions promulgating a delimited construct for God (but that is not evident). If, on the other hand, humanity is just equipped with fallible and misguidable cognitive functions, then we'd expect to observe plenty of religions proliferating their conceptions of entertaining gods (and that is evident). The soundest scientific judgment is that people are not born to believe in gods, but gods are born to be believable.

References

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