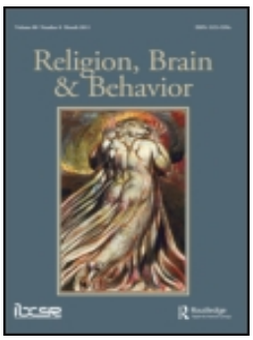

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EDITORIAL

On the Naturalness of Religion

Some scholars of religion argue that human cognitive systems inevitably yield religious beliefs and commitments. This view, known as the *naturalness of religion thesis*, is based on recent advances in the cognitive science of religion. Some scholars hold a strong position on the naturalness thesis, denying the relevance of much environmental input in the development of cognitive systems, whereas others support a weaker form of the thesis that seeks to incorporate the role of cultural factors in religious expression. The underlying cognitive research that has spawned the naturalness thesis is generally not in question; it is the interpretation of this research that drives the debate.

While the naturalness of religion thesis has generated significant academic interest and discussion, its implications extend well beyond purely academic concerns. Whether or not religion is "natural" is relevant for understanding issues concerning the legal protection of religious expression, basic human rights, and conflict resolution between proponents of religious and secular values. It is also central to understanding what it means to be human.

The most thorough articulation of the naturalness thesis is Robert McCauley's seminal book *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not*. In this issue of RBB we offer a symposium on McCauley's book. McCauley describes naturalness as thought processes or behaviors that are characterized by ease, automaticity, and fluency. He distinguishes two types of naturalness that should be considered as existing along a continuum. On one side of the continuum, maturational naturalness arises as a consequence of normal development and requires little environmental input, such as learning to walk. On the other side, practiced naturalness arises not through the normal course of physical and psychological development, but rather through consistent training, such as learning to play a musical instrument.

McCauley places religious cognition on the maturational side of the continuum and science on the practiced side. There is vigorous debate in the field about where religion and science fall along this continuum, and this diversity of judgment is evident in the symposium commentaries. This editorial is not the place for us to weigh in on this debate but we do want to make several points as the discussion on the naturalness of religion thesis moves forward.

First, because McCauley's vocabulary frequently has both technical and colloquial meanings there is substantial risk of disputes arising from terminological misunderstandings. For example, consider the word "natural." Evolutionary and cognitive scientists seek to describe religion in natural terms, but these scholars typically do not define the word precisely. Philosophers articulate a range of relatively clear concepts of ontological naturalism, from the causal closure of the physical world and the rejection of disembodied consciousness, to the view that reality is nothing more than what the scientific method can comprehend in the long run. But most evolutionary and cognitive scientists, as scientists, suspend judgment

on such ontological issues and operate according to the policy of methodological naturalism. This requires the scientist to proceed as if ontological naturalism were correct for the purposes of the scientific work, which allows in principle that reality may contain more than science can comprehend. It follows that the working definition of "natural" for many evolutionary and cognitive scientists is simply a commitment to the scientific method. Because the study of religion involves both philosophical and scientific approaches, the usage of key terms such as "naturalism" needs to be carefully monitored.

Second, some features of the debate about where religious cognition falls along the naturalness continuum may be due to disciplinary and methodological differences. Cognitive scientists are interested in uncovering the universal cognitive architecture that produces religious concepts. Thus, they are more likely to emphasize the maturational character of religion because they study the cognitive mechanisms that produce religious beliefs and behavior; and it is indeed the case that human cognition naturally produces religious expression. On the other hand, evolutionary scientists—particularly evolutionary anthropologists—are often struck by the extraordinary plasticity of human behavior in contrast to other organisms. Consequently, they generally perceive religion lying toward the practiced end of the naturalness continuum because their attention is focused on the diversity of religious expression and how religious behaviors are critical for forming and sustaining belief and commitment.

Third, we think it is mistake to construe the debate about the naturalness of religion thesis as mirroring recent debates about adaptationist versus byproduct views of religion. Indeed, a cursory survey of the intellectual landscape reveals both adaptationists and byproduct theorists on each side of the continuum, some emphasizing the importance of cultural inputs in religious expression, and others emphasizing the inevitable and natural development of religious concepts and commitments in normal human environments.

The other articles in this issue, in their own way, contribute to the naturalness of religion conversation. Dimitris Xygalatas continues to produce pioneering research that combines ethnographic fieldwork with rigorous experimental methods. His study, conducted in Mauritius, examines religious prosociality and shows the importance of environmental factors for modulating cooperation. David Bradford offers a strong challenge to what has been one of the common neuropsychological approaches—what he refers to as the temporolimbic model—to understanding mystical experiences. He critiques this model on neuroscientific grounds, but in a novel turn he supports his argument with a careful analysis of the writings of the tenth-century mystic, Symeon the New Theologian. The range of analyses on display in this issue—from experimental fieldwork to historical neuroscience—is testimony to the extraordinary interdisciplinarity of the biocultural study of religion, which we believe signals a very promising future.

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