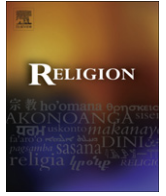


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## The relative unnaturalness of atheism: On why Geertz and Markússon are both right and wrong

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### A B S T R A C T

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Commonly scholars in the cognitive science of religion (CSR) have advanced the naturalness of religion thesis. That is, ordinary cognitive resources operating in ordinary human environments typically lead to some kind of belief in supernatural agency and perhaps other religious ideas. Special cultural scaffolding is unnecessary. Supernaturalism falls near a natural anchor point. In contrast, widespread conscious rejection of the supernatural as in atheism appears to require either special cultural conditions that upset ordinary function, cognitive effort, or a good degree of cultural scaffolding to move people away from their maturationally natural anchor-points. Geertz and Markússon (2009) identify ways to strengthen cognitive approaches to the study of religion and culture, including atheism, but fail to demonstrate that atheism is as natural in a comparable respect as theism.

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Cognitive scientists of religion often suggest the 'naturalness' of religion. Boyer's (1994) book bears the title *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas*, McCauley (2000) has written about "The Naturalness of Religion and the Unnaturalness of Science", and Bloom's (2007) recent article is simply titled "Religion is Natural". But if religion is so 'natural' what accounts for the presence of widespread naturalism, atheism, and religious agnosticism,<sup>1</sup> particularly in contemporary northern European countries?

Geertz and Markússon (2009) rightly argue that such evidence is no defeater for the naturalness thesis prominent in the cognitive science of religion (CSR). In doing so, Geertz and Markússon helpfully highlight the importance of devoting more scholarly attention to the study of atheism, and identify several intellectual resources that might help fill-out an account of atheism, and in turn, provide a more complete explanation for the cross-cultural recurrence of religious ideas and practices. As commentaries that merely affirm the target article make for dull reading, here I will attend to some finer points on which Geertz and Markússon's argument could be tighter.

### On the naturalness of religion

The naturalness of a particular thought or action refers to its degree of fluency, ease, automaticity, and reflexivity. Speaking our native language, walking, doing simple arithmetic, and other tasks usually are 'natural' in this cognitive sense. Learning a new language, ballet dancing, and doing advanced calculus are relatively 'unnatural'. In the context of CSR explanations of religion, something more specific is typically meant by 'natural': that the activity in question (mental or motor) arises through the course of ordinary development without special cultural support. Robert McCauley refers to this kind of 'naturalness' as maturational naturalness in contrast with practiced naturalness (Barrett, 2008; McCauley, 2000). Practiced naturalness refers to processing automaticity that is not simply acquired by being a normal human in a normal human environment, but requires special cultural support or 'cultural scaffolding' and rehearsal. Someone may attain such mastery of calculus that it bears the marks of cognitive naturalness (automaticity, fluency, etc.), but such mastery is typically only acquired through cultural support such as writing systems, explicit instruction and formal education, and through years of deliberate, effortful practice. McCauley notes that many forms of cultural expression actually fall on a continuum between maturational and practiced

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<sup>1</sup> Though I recognize the varied and sometimes controversial use of the label, following Geertz and Markússon I will capture these various positions with the label 'atheism'.

naturalness. Fluency in our native language might be maturationally natural, but picking up on the finer points of oral rhetoric may require special instruction and practice and hence inch a bit toward practiced naturalness.

Though McCauley's distinction between maturational naturalness and practiced naturalness has been made only recently, the emphasis on the maturationally natural is evident throughout CSR explanations. Ideas that are maturationally natural are also referred to as highly 'intuitive' in this literature. For instance, Kelemen (2004) has offered experimental evidence to support an affirmative answer to her titular question, 'Are Children "Intuitive Theists"?'. Saying that children are 'intuitive theists' is equivalent to saying that theism is maturationally natural, emerging in childhood (but to phrase it thus would have made for a cumbersome title).

Many CSR scholars, myself included, try to account for the widespread recurrence of religious expression across cultures and throughout history as a product of cognitive systems that are not dependent upon any *distinctive* cultural inputs. That is, much—but by no means all—of what is captured by the label 'religion' falls on the maturationally natural end of the naturalness continuum. Supernaturalism is relatively more maturationally natural than atheism. Because 'maturationally natural' makes for clumsy parlance, we typically say more simply that theism is more natural than atheism.

### Explaining atheism

What then about atheism? Does atheism or irreligion defeat the naturalness of religion thesis? Not at all. Though maturationally natural phenomena do not vary radically across populations, it does not follow that there is no natural variation in such expression. It seems to be maturationally natural to perceive that the sun moves across the sky (and believe this to be the case), but even young children can learn that the sun does not move relative to the earth. To further illustrate, psychologists have gathered good evidence that humans have a (maturationally) natural propensity to use shoddy reasoning strategies such as ignoring baseline probabilities and paying special attention to confirming evidence for a proposition at the expense of disconfirming evidence (Gilovich, 1991), but under special cultural conditions and with practice we may over-ride such reasoning problems and achieve a degree of practiced naturalness that buffers against these errors. Consequently, we expect to see a certain degree of intra-cultural and even cross-cultural variation on forms of expression that are, nevertheless, heavily anchored by maturationally natural cognition. Geertz and Markússon are right to note that the naturalness thesis in CSR is not deterministic and it is perfectly compatible with CSR that occasional naturalists appear in the historical record.

Nevertheless, widespread rejection of any and all supernaturalism and religion and what appears to be a historically recent swell in localized atheism does demand an explanation. I have previously combined these two strategies in sketching a possible and admittedly speculative CSR explanation of widespread atheism (Barrett, 2004). Geertz and Markússon have raised challenges to some features of my account, and though I am not convinced my account will win the day (evidence is sorely needed), I do not see that it fails on the grounds that Geertz and Markússon suggest. I try to clarify what I take to be misunderstandings below.

#### Agency detection

One suggestion for why religious beliefs are widespread is that humans have an agency detection device (ADD) that might be characterized as hypersensitive (thus, HADD)—tuned to register the presence of agency given inconclusive evidence. The degree of sensitivity may vary depending upon the degree of 'urgency' for survival in the context. If life and limb are on the line, the ADD may become particularly hypersensitive to evidence of agency. Occasionally such 'detections' are ambiguous with regard to the sort of agency detected. Someone is doing something but that someone does not seem to have the sorts of properties of the natural agents we know such as people and animals. If such a 'detection' fits well with the agency of a postulated supernatural agent, belief in this agent may be reinforced (e.g., the house really is haunted), or perhaps a new supernatural agent may be postulated.

Supposing such detection of agency-that-seems-to-not-be-natural does occur occasionally, the supernaturalist can label such events as evidence of the gods or spirits. The strict naturalist has the difficulty that these 'detections' may have to be either deliberately over-ridden ('yes, it seemed like someone was there, but it just couldn't have been') or labelled in a naturalistic way ('it wasn't really agency but a collection of ordinary mechanistic events that must account for my thinking that someone was acting'). Such counter-explanation for HADD-experiences requires more cognitive effort and education to come up with satisfactory naturalistic explanations that attribute such experiences to the whims of the gods.

#### Moral realism

Boyer (2001) argued that gods frequently reinforce natural moral intuitions that essentially all people have. One of these intuitions is that some things are simply right or wrong not just conventional/convenient/expedient or not. We are moral realists. Gods, by virtue of having access to the facts of any matter, also know the moral facts of the matter, and (perhaps not surprisingly) tend to see things the way we do. Theists, then, can glibly accept moral realism. Not so for the atheist. Atheists may have approximately the same moral intuitions and behave just as morally as theists, but have some intellectual work to do that the theist has managed to avoid by relying on the authority of the gods. Atheists have this extra work to do in the moral domain, but that does not mean that it cannot be done. Indeed, Geertz and Markússon make this point too when they write: 'We argue that atheists also find moral certitude in the ideologies of a just society or in human compassion or simply in enlightened altruism.' Atheists must have an 'ideology'—a systematic body of concepts and relations, propositionally developed—to support moral certitude. Developing ideologies is more cognitively costly and less maturationally natural than simply saying 'the gods say this is wrong'.

#### Death

The death of a loved one is an emotionally-charged event that is frequently accompanied by feelings, thoughts, and even experiences that the deceased is still present (Foster, 2009). Several CSR scholars have postulated mechanisms by which death then poses a special challenge for maintaining the belief that there is no afterlife or 'soul' that survives death (Bering, 2006; Bering et al., 2005; Bloom, 2004; Boyer, 2001).

Bloom, for instance, argues that because of ordinary cognitive organization people are intuitive mind-body dualists, and the belief in a soul that survives death is natural (Bloom, 2004, 2007). If correct, theists or atheists who reject such a dualism and an afterlife that begins upon death will both likely experience similar dissonance with the death of a loved one. Complete naturalists, however, do seem to have a more difficult conflict to solve.

### Native creationism

Developmental experimental evidence marshalled by Kelemen and others suggests that children have a maturationally natural propensity to regard the world as intentionally and purposefully designed (Kelemen, 1999, 2003, 2004; Kelemen and DiYanni, 2005), and this bias may extend into adulthood (Kelemen and Rosset, 2009). Consequently, children (and perhaps adults) find the idea of intentional agency accounting for the natural world relatively intuitive. Though adult testimony on such matters does bear on children's beliefs in this area, young children with parents and schools that affirm evolutionary accounts as the best explanation for features of animals still find creationist accounts more attractive (Evans, 2000, 2001). Geertz and Markússon claim the evidence is 'contradictory depending upon the theory behind the experiments and is still being debated' but cite no relevant data that challenges Kelemen's claims. It could be that Kelemen's findings fail to generalize to yet-to-be-tested populations, but given the state-of-the-art, it appears those who reject that there is intentional design lying behind the cosmos have the burden of producing accounts for why it is that the natural world gives the appearances of design.

### Explanatory role of culture

As Geertz and Markússon note, many of us who take a cognitive approach to explaining cultural phenomena are uncomfortable with locating the 'cause' for the cross-cultural recurrence of any given phenomenon in 'culture'. The reason for this discomfort simply is that if we understand 'culture' to indicate the particular beliefs and practices of a given group of people, it isn't clear how such particulars explain cross-culturally recurrent patterns. Recurrent cultural expression seems to require recurrent causes such as undergirding cognitive systems or environmental regularities. That people tend to be religious is not adequately explained by the fact that people are born into religious cultures. Religion doesn't explain religion.

If 'culture', however, is meant to indicate a human social environment complete with artefacts, language, and other symbolic communication, then there is no disagreement. Cognitive accounts typically assume that common features of human environments play a critical role in helping to shape maturationally natural cognitive system and fill in the content of religious beliefs and practices. Though maturationally natural cognition is fairly rigid, it typically requires a degree of tuning through environmental inputs. Once in place these cognitive systems do anchor cultural expression. Ideas and actions that stray too far from these anchor-points (i.e., they are difficult for our cognitive equipment), will be less likely to be realized let alone broadly distributed in a population. Nevertheless, CSR accounts do recognize that various forms of 'cultural scaffolding' can help push or pull away from the cognitive anchors.<sup>2</sup> Literacy, artefact creation, social structures, mnemonic devices, and collective ritualized actions are all instances of cultural scaffolding and feature to a greater or lesser extent in at least the work of Boyer (2001), McCauley, 2000, McCauley and Lawson (2002), Whitehouse (2004), but urging additional attention to such factors is not unmerited.

Pitting 'culture' against 'cognition' is to erect a false dichotomy. Cognitive explanations that place human psychology in a vacuum or cultural explanations that pretend that human information-processing systems are trivial details when it comes to explaining why people think and behave the way that they do are both unhelpful.

### Conclusion: is atheism natural after all?

Commonly CSR theorists have advanced the idea that atheism is relatively unnatural and theism is relatively natural from a cognitive perspective. That is, ordinary maturationally natural cognitive resources operating in ordinary human environments typically lead to some kind of belief in supernatural agency and perhaps other religious ideas. Very little practiced naturalness is required and little cultural scaffolding is necessary. Supernaturalism falls near a maturationally natural anchor point. In contrast, widespread conscious rejection of the supernatural appears to require either special cultural conditions that upset the function of maturationally natural outputs, cognitive effort, or a good degree of cultural scaffolding to move people away from their maturationally natural anchor-points. This relative unnaturalness may be one reason why some studies find a relationship between atheism and formal education and intelligence. Special cognitive resources or special institutions (such as formal educational institutions) may assist in the maintenance of atheism.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Geertz and Markússon seem open to this point when they write: 'The habit of atheism *may* need more scaffolding to be acquired, and its religious counterpart may need more effort to kick...' On this we agree, but they continue, '... but even so, that does not, *ipso facto*, make the latter more natural than the former.' In the sense in which CSR scholars typically use the term 'natural,' that does, *ipso facto*, make the latter more natural than the former.

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<sup>2</sup> I have not been able to determine the origins of the term 'cultural scaffolding' in the sense discussed here. I have used the term previously (Barrett, 2008) but suspect that I adopted it from public lectures of either Harvey Whitehouse or Robert McCauley.

<sup>3</sup> One should be careful to not make too much of such correlations, particularly when trying to find correlates of a relatively small minority position. Those who are socially exceptional by their own efforts—such as atheists historically have been and still are in many nations—will likely be exceptional on other measures. For instance, it is likely that not only are atheists and scientists higher than average on intelligence and education, but also theologians and post-structuralists.

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