

The New Atheism and the Scientific-Naturalist Tradition

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Kripke Center Lecture

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Introduction

[1] It is such a pleasure to come back to visit Creighton. I graduated in 1973 and I have been invited back three or four times since then. This university has a warm place in my heart. The time I spent here was one of the happiest periods of my life, and I hope it is that for all of you students, as well.

[2] I once had the flattering but daunting request to write a philosophical autobiography, and more recently to modify it to make it a theological autobiography as well. What I said about my time here at Creighton was that “my world was whole. The focus of my worship had shifted from the interiority of private prayer to the communal liturgy. A fine Gothic-revival church dominates Creighton’s campus, and Saturday night dates ended there with midnight mass. Degree requirements included courses in theology. Most influential for my later studies was a course in my freshman year titled ‘Literature and Theology’; Virginia Shaddy showed us how modern philosophical changes could be traced first in theology and later in literature. The implicit message that came from worshipping with faculty was that faith and reason went happily together.”

[3] But rather than come here to contribute to that sense of the unity of faith and academia, I have come instead to lecture on . . . atheism. Specifically, I will be focusing on a handful of recent publications directed against religion. My plan is to introduce you to a little of this literature, and then offer two sorts of responses. First, I will place these current books in their historical context. I teach in a Christian seminary, and it has occurred to me that students there who did not go through the shock, as I did, of pursuing graduate studies in a thoroughly atheistic environment, tend to think of non-believers simply as people who have not yet heard the Gospel. So the assumption is that they believe pretty much the same stuff we do, except we add our theological convictions. Or, put the other way around, they simply lack our religious beliefs. What I have gradually learned, though, is that our well-educated secular friends actually hold to a radically different worldview – with just some overlap with ours. Consequently I have begun teaching a doctoral seminar on the origins of modern atheism. In that class we look at the scholarly developments that first made unbelief a live option (this was early in the modern period); and at later developments that have made authentic belief appear to many to be impossible.

[4] So my first response to the current atheistic literature will be to relate it to the longer story of these intellectual developments. My second sort of response will be to suggest some ways in which we Christians can incorporate some lessons learned from the atheists.

Survey of the Literature

[5] So far I have read three of the best selling recent books promoting an atheist agenda. One is Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*; another is Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*; the third is Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. Dawkins is a biologist by training, who holds a peculiar position at Oxford University: Professor of the Public Understanding of Science. Hitchens is a journalist, and Dennett is a professor of philosophy at Tufts University.

[6] The three books have enough in common that I would not recommend reading more than one. The most surprising commonality is the expression of attitudes that I (and I assume many others) have found exceedingly unpleasant. I say that this is surprising because ordinarily editors at significant publishing companies do not let their authors get away with this sort of tone in a (supposedly) academic book. Hitchens is the worst (and this may be correlated with the fact that his book is *not* published by a well-known press). He is self-congratulatory in telling us how young he was when he saw through religious claims. He refers to a religion teacher from his childhood as “a pious old trout” (2) and says that his “little ankle-strap sandals curled with embarrassment for her” (3). Religion, he says, comes from “the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our incurable demand for knowledge (as well as for comfort, reassurance, and other infantile needs)” (64). “As I write these words, and as you read them,” he says, “people of faith are in their different ways planning your and my destruction, and the destruction of all the hard-won human attainments. . . *Religion poisons everything?*” (13).

[7] I found Dawkins to be the least unpleasant to read. However, he often writes with an air of superiority. In discussing Anselm’s argument for the existence of God, he says: “The very idea that grand conclusions could follow from such . . . trickery offends me aesthetically, so I must take care to refrain from bandying words like ‘fool’” (81).

[8] Dennett claims to be offering a balanced investigation into the nature and causes of religion, but he manages to be annoyingly patronizing. “Like the revivalist preacher, I say unto you, O religious folks who fear to break the taboo [this is the supposed taboo on studying religion]: Let go! Let go! You’ll hardly notice the drop! The sooner we set about studying religion scientifically, the sooner your deepest fears will be allayed. But that is just a plea, not an argument, so I must persist with my case. I ask just that you try to keep an open mind and refrain from prejudging what I say because I am a godless philosopher, while I similarly do my best to understand you” (20-21).

[9] So much for tone. These books have a number of themes in common. First, all argue for naturalistic (rather than theistic) accounts of the origin of religion. I had already read Hitchens’s claim that it comes from the infancy of the species. Dennett’s book is interesting here; he gives an excellent overview of current work in the new discipline called the cognitive science of religion. I will come back to this topic later.

[10] A second and related area of overlap is speculation about why people continue to hold religious beliefs now, even after we have had their “primitive” origins explained to us. For example, Dawkins argues that humans have evolved so as to be gullible as children. Children need to acquire a great amount of information from parents and other authorities early in life, and then ordinarily not question it. Because of this vulnerability, he believes that it is child abuse to teach religion to small children!

[11] Third, the books are rich resources for information about some of the most ridiculous religious beliefs and practices that anthropologists have dug up. All three, for example, describe the cargo cults that originated on Pacific islands, beginning in the nineteenth century. For example, during World War II American forces recruited men from the island of Tana to build a base on the neighboring island of Efate. When the workers returned to Tana with tales of the possessions of the Americans, technology beyond anything they could imagine, the whole society was thrown into turmoil. The islanders, many of whom had been converted to Christianity earlier:

. . . stopped going to church and began to build landing strips, warehouses and radio masts out of bamboo, in the belief that if it worked on Efate for the Americans, it would work for them on Tana. Carved figurines of American warplanes, helmets and rifles were made from bamboo and used as religious icons. Islanders began to march in parades with USA painted, carved, or tattooed on their chests and backs. John Frum emerged as the name of their messiah, although there are no records of an American soldier with that name.

[12] When the last American GI left at the end of the war, the islanders predicted John Frum’s return. The movement continued to flourish. . . They believe that John Frum is waiting in the volcano Yasur with his warriors to deliver his cargo to the people of Tana. . . They believe that their annual rituals will draw the god John Frum down from the volcano and deliver the cargo of prosperity to all of the islanders (Dennett: 99-100).

[13] Now, it is hard to deny that this is funny, but when such examples make up the steady diet of the book they have a powerful rhetorical effect.

[14] A fourth commonality is a double concern with the relation between religion and morality. All of the authors attack the idea that good morals depend on religion, and then set out to show that, in fact, most of the evil in the world comes from religion. The question of the need for religion – or some account of ultimate reality – in order to resolve moral relativism is complex and important. But I have to admit that simple arguments for the role of God in maintaining the moral order are easy to confound. Hitchens reports on a debate between the philosopher A. J. Ayer and a certain Bishop Butler. Ayer said that he saw no evidence for the existence of any god. Butler retorted: “Then I cannot see why you do not lead a life of unbridled immorality.” Hitchens then comments: Was Butler “in fact not telling Ayer, in his own naïve way, that if freed from the restraints of doctrine *he himself* would choose to lead ‘a life of unbridled immorality?’” (185-86). I have to agree, he scored a point here.

[15] We are all too familiar with the standard accounts of the evils of Christian history: crusades, inquisitions, burning witches. One of the greatest shocks of my graduate school days was reading of the torture and execution of both Protestants and Catholics, by their fellow Christians, during the reformation period. Hitchens and Dawkins go on to argue that religion can be found lurking behind nearly all of the evils of the world. Where many of us would argue that causes of conflict are economic, political, or ethnic, and that religious differences become tools of one or both sides, Dawkins says that this is “pusillanimous reluctance to use religious names for warring factions. In Northern Ireland, Catholics and Protestants are euphemized to ‘Nationalists’ and ‘Loyalists’ respectively” (21). The so-called ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia was really, he says, religious “cleansing” – Catholics, Moslems, and Orthodox. He even has an extended argument that Hitler was a Christian and that this served as his *main* motivation.

[16] This portrayal of religion, particularly Christianity, as the source of the world’s greatest evils is a point of view that all of us need to be aware of and take seriously – even though the atheists’ scholarship on religion is pretty bad. I have assigned Dawkins’s book to my seminary class this term. It should not be the case that Christians need to defend themselves by saying that we were not really *as bad as* our detractors say we are, and that atheists such as Stalin are even worse. Here is a call to repentance if ever there was one!

Some Historical Context

[17] I have spoken with a few scholars about this sudden rush to publication of anti-religious books. Keith Ward, recently retired Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, has made a careful study of the phenomenon. To the question of why *now*, he answers that the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 was a major factor. This may in fact help us to understand Hitchens’s assertion that somewhere in the world there are religious people plotting to destroy us. I recommend Ward’s recent book, *The Case for Religion*. In place of the snarling dispositions of the atheistic books considered here there is Ward’s sparkling sense of humor. For example, after pointing out that most universities teach courses in “religion,” and that the usual first lecture is on how impossible it is to define “religion,” Ward says: “The courses continue to be called courses on religion, however, because that sounds better than having a course entitled, ‘I do not know what I am talking about’” (2004: 9).

[18] I also recommend Keith Ward's book titled *Is Religion Dangerous?* I asked him over coffee how one could settle the dispute between Dawkins and myself about the real causes of violence in Ireland and other such conflicts. It was actually a rhetorical question, because I did not think it could be done. Keith, with his usual modesty and twinkling eye, told me that he had just done it – and recommended this book.

[19] But back to the grim atheists: having looked at the history, it is clear that, apart from the attitudes, there is little that is new in any of these books. Let me give you a thumbnail sketch of the history as we try to unravel it in my seminar.

[20] James Turner makes a startling claim in his book, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America*. He argues that disbelief was *not* a live option in the U.S. until roughly between 1865 and 1890. This may be surprising to some because we are aware of proofs for the existence of God going back through the Middle Ages to ancient Greek philosophers. However, it has recently become common to see medieval philosophers and theologians as *not* intending to persuade atheists to believe in God – since there were no atheists – but rather as engaging in the much more modest task of showing that reason could justify belief in a God already accepted on other grounds and for other reasons. The so-called medieval synthesis made God so central to all branches of knowledge and all spheres of culture that it was *inconceivable* that God *not* exist.

[21] One of the ironies of the history of unbelief is that the source of agnosticism can be traced to the Reformation. If one thinks of the agnostic not as one who simply has not formed a judgment on the existence of God, but rather as one who has concluded that human reason is incapable of making such a judgment, the story traces back to Catholic apologists in the sixteenth century such as Michel de Montaigne. These apologists revived ancient skeptical methods to show that there is no rational way to decide between Protestant and Catholic claims. Therefore the only sensible course of action is to stay within the established (that is, Catholic) faith. The availability of these skeptical arguments helped pave the way for atheism, of course: if one cannot tell whether the Protestant or Catholic version is correct, then maybe none is (Popkin: chap. 3). But a variety of other factors were needed to justify a positive rejection of religious belief.

[22] Philosopher Merold Westphal, who teaches philosophy at Fordham University, helpfully distinguishes two sorts of atheism. One he calls evidential atheism, well represented by Bertrand Russell's account of what he would say if he were to meet God and God asked why he had not been a believer: Not enough evidence God! Not enough evidence! Given that there have been genuine difficulties in adapting theological reasoning to modern canons of rationality, this response is readily understandable.

[23] But if religious claims are false then one needs an *explanation* of why they are so widely believed; just as, if there are no witches, we want to know what caused people to believe there were. David Hume in Britain and Baron d'Holbach in France in the eighteenth century began the attempt to explain the origin of religion naturalistically. They argued that religion is a response to fear of the unknown, coupled with superstitious attempts to control or propitiate unseen powers. Such attempts continue today, as I have indicated.

[24] But why does religion persist in the modern world, now that we understand natural causes? The explanations here come from Westphal's second variety of atheists, the so-called masters of suspicion. Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud practiced the hermeneutics of suspicion, which is the "attempt to expose the self-deceptions involved in hiding our actual operative motives from ourselves, individually or collectively, in order not to notice . . . how much our beliefs are shaped by values we profess to disown" (13). These three thinkers developed their suspicion with primary emphasis, respectively, on political economics, bourgeois morality, and psycho-sexual development, but each also subjected the religion of Christendom to devastating critique.

[25] Two further steps were needed to make atheism a truly viable position. It would be possible to say that religion is an illusion, but a harmless or even beneficial illusion in that it shores up morality. So two sorts of arguments were needed. One sort was to show that religion did not serve to reveal anything about the moral order that we could not get just as well by the use of human reason. Most of the work in philosophical ethics during the modern period had this as its aim. The other was to adduce historical evidence to the effect that religion has, in fact, promoted the worst evils in history – or at least more evil than good.

[26] So within the space of two and a half centuries, roughly from 1650 to 1890, unbelief became a live possibility. But this is not merely the excision of God from an otherwise common worldview, but rather the slow development of a *rival* tradition alongside the various theistic traditions and sub-traditions.

[27] At this point I want to address a favorite topic of mine, the relations between Christian theology and the natural sciences. It is widely believed in our society today that Christianity and science are incompatible and even at war with one another. I am so grateful for my education here at Creighton that immunized me against this very unfortunate attitude. So one point of my tracing the modern developments that have led to so much unbelief in our culture is, first, to acknowledge that Christianity today does have a powerful rival. But, second, and equally important, I am arguing that the rival is not the natural sciences themselves. It is instead this new tradition – it can be called scientific naturalism, or scientific atheism. When Dawkins writes his popular books, he is not writing as a scientist at all, but rather as a current contributor to this atheistic tradition, which began just after the Reformation.

[28] Notice how little has changed in the works of the new atheists. There are naturalistic explanations of the origin of religion. However, I would say that these contemporary accounts of why sophisticated cultures are still religious are thin and naïve in comparison with the old masters. Then is also the reinvention of the severing of the religious justification from morality, and the arguments for the evils of religion.

[29] Several years ago I was invited to a conference at Cambridge University to give some papers, one of which was to be a response to Richard Dawkins. I noted that he was scheduled for one day, and I for the next. I was much relieved. I assumed he would give his paper on Monday and then go back to Oxford. I could say whatever I liked about him behind his back on Tuesday. Well, the first thing he did when he arrived was to seek me out and ask when my paper would be. He was pleased that he would be able to stay and hear it.

Oh, no! What have I said? I went over the paper in the evening and scratched out most of the pejorative language.

[30] If that was not bad enough, he asked to join me at breakfast on Tuesday morning. Now, I am not even human until the coffee has taken effect, let alone a competent philosopher. He was sincerely disappointed that no one had significantly challenged his paper the day before, his argument that the universe could not have been designed by God, because God is supposed to be utterly simple, and all designers are highly complex. Although we could not make much progress in agreement, mainly since I myself did not know what theologians were supposed to mean by God's simplicity, I was impressed by his sincere desire for the truth. So, despite my disparagement of his writings, I care about him as a person. I think that those who are so engaged with God in a negative way are a lot closer to the Kingdom than those who never think about God at all.

Theology and the Cognitive Science of Religion

[31] I now turn to one point at which the new atheists have something to offer that their eighteenth-century predecessors did not. I mentioned earlier that Dennett provides a fine overview of the new cognitive science of religion. I will describe a bit of this to you. Of course, it is intended as just another *alternative* account of where religion comes from. But I have concluded that it can be adapted and adopted into Christians' understanding of religion. It may well be a fair account of the human contribution to the development of religion, which merely needs to be complemented by an account of divine action. Here is how I shall proceed. First I will give you an overview of the work of Pascal Boyer, who is most influential in Dennett's account. Then I will present Catholic Modernist theologian George Tyrrell's theological account of the development of religion and show how neatly Boyer's work can be adopted into it.

[32] An important feature of Boyer's work is what he calls turning the question of the origin of religion upside down. We tend to be impressed by the wide variety of religions and to ask for an explanation of the diversity. Instead, he says, we need to recognize how many more possibilities there are for religious concepts, beliefs, and practices, and then explain why only the ones that exist have survived. What has narrowed down the options? Is there something that religious concepts have in common that explains why they have been preserved and passed down to new generations?

[33] This aspect of Boyer's explanation is his theory of religious concepts as "minimally counterintuitive." From cognitive science Boyer introduces the idea of a template, which allows for quick development of more particular concepts. We have only a small number of templates: PERSON, ANIMAL, ARTIFACT, POLLUTING SUBSTANCE, NATURAL OBJECT. The template – for example, ANIMAL – specifies variables that need to be filled in to create a new concept, such as a *giraffe*: we need to fill in its general body shape, what it eats, where it lives, how it reproduces. But the template itself carries a great deal of tacit knowledge. For example, if one female giraffe bears live young, then all will be expected to do the same.

[34] Boyer's thesis regarding religious concepts is that they are anomalous, in that they add a special tag that violates one or only a few characteristics contributed by the template. Here

are some examples: A spirit violates the PERSON template by adding to the template the anomalous feature that a spirit has no body. A statue to which one prays uses the ARTIFACT template but adds anomalous cognitive powers. An omniscient God is also created from the PERSON template, but with very special additional cognitive powers.

[35] Boyer and others have done research in several cultures with the goal of showing that the concepts that are anomalous, but only in these minimal ways, are more likely to be recalled by the subjects than either normal concepts *or* concepts that do not fit a template at all. So they claim that, from among an effectively infinite number of possible religious concepts, the ones we actually find in the world have survived and spread because they have this feature of minimal anomalousness. These are concepts that are easily formed by slight alteration of a template, and they happen to be more memorable simply as a result of how the human mind or brain works.

[36] In addition, we have inference systems that are turned on by different kinds of entities. These are sometimes called cognitive modules; some examples are an agency-detection system, closely related to a system for detecting goal-directed movement; a system for keeping track of who's who; systems dealing with the physics of solid objects, physical causation, and linking function to structure. To the extent, then, that religious concepts have enough in common with ordinary concepts, they set off these inference systems, and this makes some sets of beliefs about the relevant entities natural, and therefore likely to be understood, remembered, elaborated in specific ways, and passed on to others.

[37] There are two further aspects of Boyer's work that I will present here, regarding morality and religious practices. Boyer says that a typical assumption by and about religious believers is that belief in gods or spirits comes first, and then both religious practices and moral prescriptions follow. Boyer believes that morality and religious practices take priority, and both of these make religious belief more plausible. The most interesting of his discussions of religious practices is in a chapter dealing with the relation between religion and death. Corpses are highly anomalous because two different inference systems give conflicting answers to how we should deal with them. The system that detects animacy recognizes that they are no longer alive, but the person-file system cannot suddenly be shut off. The corpse is now an object that needs to be disposed of, yet this is still uncle Joe. Religions incorporate assorted elaborate rituals to satisfy these conflicting needs and attitudes. Insofar as the rituals are related to concepts of gods or spirits, participation in them makes belief in the spirits or gods easier to acquire.

[38] Regarding morality, Boyer cites studies showing that very small children, in different cultures, develop remarkably similar moral intuitions. By the age of three they can distinguish among moral, conventional, and prudential rules. He goes on to claim that our evolution as a social species is sufficient to explain our shared morality. However, without an evolutionary explanation, humans in earlier ages have needed some other explanation. Spirits or gods who know what we are doing to whom, and who are interested parties in the transactions, make for a highly credible explanation.

[39] In short, human brains have evolved to work in ways that suited us for survival in our early environments. Religious concepts, belief systems, practices, and rituals are natural by-products of these cognitive processes.

[40] Now, how might Christians respond to Boyer's work? My own response, when he is applying his theories to what Westerners often call primitive religions, is to say: "yes, yes, this explains all of those strange beliefs and practices." But then, "wait a minute. This doesn't apply to us Christians!" So one way a Christian can appropriate Boyer is to say that, insofar as his theories are correct, they explain other religions, but as the great Neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth claimed, *religion is* a human phenomenon, while divine revelation in Christ is something quite different.

[41] I am going to take a different tack here, though. I am going to try out the hypothesis that Boyer is giving an account of the *human* contributions to Christianity as well. However, his being a purely naturalistic account, it is, from a theological standpoint, necessarily incomplete since it leaves God out of the picture.

[42] I begin with a theory of the natural development of religions developed by the Catholic theologian George Tyrrell a century ago. Tyrrell was the most prolific theologian of the Catholic modernist movement, which was an attempt to reconcile the Catholic heritage with the thought of the modern world. Two of Tyrrell's concerns were to respond to the intellectual crisis created by biblical criticism and to replace an account of theological knowledge based on authority by one parallel with modern science (1907).

[43] Here is how Tyrrell understood the development of religion. He points out that the world appears to be more than the natural world, and that the physical world is not self-explanatory. Human faculties are well suited for accumulating knowledge about nature and history, but we only grasp dimly the realities of the spiritual world. We do so by experiment: This begins with the construction of moral codes and religious practices. Then, just as science explains observations by means of hypotheses about unseen realities, so religious beliefs are constructed to explain morality and religious practices.

[44] In Tyrrell's early work he took moral codes to be purely human invention. (I will explain an important later addition in a moment.) Individuals are faced with various situations and have to decide how they ought to feel about them and how they ought to act. After a time of observing the outcomes of these individual "experiments," society is able to formulate a code regarding morality. The truth of these codes is, so far, simply their adequacy for the guidance of life and the prediction of the consequences of one's actions.

[45] But then the question arises as to why *these particular* moral codes and religious observances are correct. We then devise an imaginary view of the spiritual world that provides an explanation. So religious belief grows up *to account for* the moral life. By providing an imagined view of the spiritual world it explains why *these* moral and religious practices are the correct ones.

[46] First-order accounts of these attempts to visualize the spiritual world are in poetic or "prophetic" language, which is symbolic, imaginative, and imprecise. Scripture and Christian dogmas are of this order. It is to be expected that forms of expression will change over time, since in grasping for language the prophet uses whatever categories, images, and concepts are available at the time.

[47] Despite the 100-year time gap, there are striking parallels between Tyrrell's theory of how religions develop and those of contemporary cognitive science of religion. Both

understand religion, in the first instance, as a natural phenomenon, developing in history according to, in Tyrrell's words, "natural laws of religious psychology" (1907: 76). Tyrrell recognized the tendency of religious representations to be distorted by these psychological laws, and he pointed out that his Catholicism, not being a rational, purified religion, is an eclectic mixture, a jumble of levels, not all logically consistent.

[48] So the integration of the cognitive science of religion into Tyrrell's theological account of religion turns out to be surprisingly easy. What the cognitive science of religion provides is those "natural laws of religious psychology" that Tyrrell believed to exist but did not know in detail. Tyrrell's and Boyer's theories are complementary.

[49] In addition to the complementarity, there is significant overlap between Tyrrell's and Boyer's descriptions of religion and its development. They agree that the only language we have for religion is drawn from the natural world and has to be adapted. Tyrrell says that religious language is metaphorical. Linguists point out that when a metaphor is used there are always ways in which what is being described is like the original application, but also in important ways *not* like it. So this is a more general theory of religious language than Boyer's but would include Boyer's minimally counterintuitive concepts.

[50] Both agree that practices and moral codes are prior to religious belief; religious beliefs are invented to explain and justify the codes and practices. A major point of difference, though, is between their accounts of the sources of moral codes. Boyer takes the sociobiologists' line and argues that our evolutionary past accounts for a universal set of moral intuitions. Tyrrell claims that we build moral codes slowly by trial and error. When faced with a choice, we take one of the options and then see what its consequences are for getting along in society.

[51] However, for Tyrrell, this is just the beginning of moral formation, and this is the aspect of his later thinking that is extremely important for distinguishing his from naturalistic accounts of religion. In his later works, Tyrrell wrote that our moral codes, as well as our religious practices and beliefs, are capable of being shaped by the action of the Holy Spirit. Either by deliberate reflection or spontaneously, an idea of God or of other spiritual realities, or of some course of action comes to mind. God's response is to provide, to those sensitive enough to notice, a feeling either *for* or *against* the idea. Tyrrell takes this to be the basis for revelation. Revelation, he says, "is a knowledge derived from, as well as concerning, the 'other world,' the supernatural. But its derivation is decidedly indirect. What alone is directly given from above, or from beyond, is the spiritual craving or impulse with its specific determination, with its sympathetic and antipathetic responses to the suggestions, practical or explanatory, that are presented to it . . ." (1907: 207). By our inward experiences of felt harmony or discord with the transcendent, we can test the value of our religious notions and of the conduct they dictate. It is in those experiences that God guides us directly. There is no other language between the soul and God (1910: 111).

[52] So this brings us to the critical point where theology has to go beyond cognitive science: the issue of divine action. Boyer claims that his account explains how religions come to be and (implicitly) that this is *all* there is to it. The theologian insists that there is another agent, a divine agent, involved – although, Tyrrell and I are claiming, one not entirely in control of the process.

[53] I believe that there are some advantages for Christians in considering the cognitive science of religion. These theories help to explain the persisting variety of religions, and the fact that religious experiences are almost always consistent with the expectations and beliefs of the tradition to which the devotee belongs. God does not produce the experience; culture and imagination do. And now in light of this recent work, we can add that they may well do so in the first instance as a consequence of the way human cognitive operators work. God merely ratifies or vetoes, and even then, only when the human subject is sensitive to the impulses of the Spirit.

Conclusions

[54] What I have tried to do in this final section is not to critique current research in the cognitive science of religion, although surely a lot of it does need to be criticized. Rather I have tried to show that it is no threat to Christian belief, since it can handily be *complemented* by a theological account of the development of religion. I hope I have also convinced you that it is a potentially valuable source of insights for Christian scholars.

[55] What shall I say about the rather virulent anti-religious, and particularly anti-Christian, publications that have been the main focus of this paper? First, it is important that we Christians know how we appear to some of the most intelligent and well-educated in our culture. As I hinted earlier, we need to take responsibility for and repent of the actual evils for which Christians have been responsible.

[56] Finally, there was a tradition in the modern period of attempting to derive theology from observations of natural phenomena; it was called natural theology. James Turner and other historians argue that one of the reasons for unbelief today is that Christian scholars relied too much on this sort of rationalistic approach to theology. When theistic arguments based on the order of nature collapsed, this was seen by many as the collapse of Christianity itself.

[57] In this lecture I have proposed a different way of understanding the relations between science and theology. I have argued that Christianity is now in competition with the scientific-atheist tradition. I call it the scientific-atheist tradition because it appears to encompass the whole of science. This gives it a great advantage in the eyes of those who are scientifically literate. We Christians are at a disadvantage if we cannot also incorporate scientific knowledge into our worldview. So I am a great fan of Catholic and other Christian universities that make a point of the compatibility of science with our theology.

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