

## Introduction

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This volume invites a renewed inquiry into an enduring question: are humans naturally religious? Do they possess a set of common characteristics transcending time, place, and culture that incline them towards religion? The answer, according to growing body of research in the cognitive and evolutionary sciences of religion, appears to be yes. “A general theme emerging from ... cognitive and evolutionary studies,” cognitive scientists Justin Barrett and Robert Lanman posit, “is the *Naturalness of Religion Thesis*,” by which they mean that:

[r]eligious thought and action are common across human history and cultures because of their relationship with particular naturally occurring human cognitive systems. Religion springs naturally from the way ordinary human cognitive systems interact with ordinary human social and natural environments.<sup>1</sup>

Echoing this notion is cognitive scientist Paul Bloom, who likewise holds that “there are certain early emerging cognitive biases that make it natural to believe in Gods and spirits, in an afterlife, and in the divine creation of the universe.”<sup>2</sup> Religion appears to be natural, therefore, insofar as religious belief and action are deeply embedded in human cognition, in the way people ordinarily think about and experience the world.

This does not mean that religious belief and religious observance are necessary or inevitable for all people, or that the human brain is ineluctably

<sup>1</sup> Justin L. Barrett and Jonathan Lanman, “The Science of Religious Beliefs,” *Religion* 38 (2008): 110.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Bloom, “Religion is Natural,” *Developmental Science* 10 (2007): 150.

“hard-wired” for religion. To appreciate this caveat, one need only observe the many people throughout the world who do not profess any religious belief at all, and the still more who do not regularly engage in religious practices. What the naturalness of religion thesis does suggest, however, is that the conscious and sustained rejection of religion and of the supernatural, wherever it might arise, may require an overriding mechanism – a cultural and intellectual scaffolding – that the acceptance of religion does not similarly require.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, although religious beliefs and practices may not manifest in all people, the naturalness of religion thesis maintains that these phenomena still arise *naturally* – that is, they regularly and predictably emerge through the normal development of human cognitive systems, without necessarily relying on the presence of “artificial” cultural or intellectual support structures.

What does this mean in practice? Apart from merely satisfying a healthy sense of scientific curiosity, why does the naturalness of religion thesis *matter*? What, if any, are the ethical, political, or social implications of a presumptive “naturalness of religion?” Does it suggest anything consequential about human nature, the nature of religion, or the proper ordering of society?

Of the many possible angles from which to approach these questions, this volume pursues one in particular: how might the naturalness of religion bear on the proposition – now increasingly contested – that there is a natural or human right to religious freedom that transcends at least to some degree the confines of particular historical and cultural contexts?<sup>4</sup> The chapters that follow revolve around this central question.

<sup>3</sup> Justin L. Barrett, “The Relative Unnaturalness of Atheism: On Why Geertz and Markusson Are Both Right and Wrong,” *Religion* 40 (2010): 169–172.

<sup>4</sup> It is tempting and common to speak of a universal right to religious freedom, or to claim that all people everywhere enjoy a right to religious freedom. Speaking loosely, there is truth in these claims. Speaking strictly, however, Nicholas Wolterstorff is surely correct when he points out in this volume that it may be more accurate to speak of a natural right to religious freedom than a universal right to religious freedom. All people with certain ordinary natural capacities can exercise religion, and they therefore possess a natural right to religious freedom in view of the fact that they possess the natural capacities that make it possible for them to exercise religion. But of course there are people in whom these capacities are not operative, and therefore there are people who do not possess a right to religious freedom in any ordinary or relevant sense. As Wolterstorff explains, “the right to free exercise of one’s religion is, strictly speaking, a permission-right rather than a claim-right. That is, it is the right to be permitted to do something rather than the right to be treated a certain way by others. Of course, corresponding to the permission-right to exercise one’s religion freely is the claim-right, with respect to others, that they not interfere with one’s exercise of one’s religion.” Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Why There Is a

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In so doing, they grapple, directly or indirectly, with what we shall term the “anthropological case” for religious freedom. The anthropological case for religious freedom is the contention that the viability and strength of the argument for religious freedom as a natural or human right rests at least partly on the claim that our species of *Homo sapiens* is also in a strong sense *Homo religiosus*, to borrow a phrase of Mircea Eliade.<sup>5</sup> In other words, a case for the right to religious freedom can be derived in part from evidence that religion is in some sense not merely epiphenomenal or accidental, but a regular and predictable feature of human nature and human experience, taken as a whole.

A proper examination of this question requires, first, that we situate the idea of religion’s naturalness in a broader historical and philosophical context: a task to which we now turn.

### The Enlightenment Critique and Secularization Theory

Notwithstanding a growing body of supporting evidence in the cognitive and evolutionary sciences of religion, the naturalness of religion thesis remains an underdog of sorts. It runs counter to a predominant narrative in Western thought, according to which religion is an irrational – indeed, unnatural – quirk of the credulous human mind, sustained only through inculcation, socialization, and indoctrination. Far from being natural, intrinsic, or otherwise fundamental to human experience, religion therefore represents a profoundly unnatural, unnecessary, and undesirable condition. While this outlook has remained prevalent and thriving in the present day, thanks in part to a vociferous cohort of self-styled “brights” and “new atheists,”<sup>6</sup> its origins lie in the intellectual revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, otherwise known as the Enlightenment.

Natural Right to Religious Freedom,” this volume, p. 214. Wolterstorff adds, “the bearers of the natural right to religious freedom are those human beings who are capable of functioning as persons. A human being in a permanent coma cannot exercise her religion; accordingly, the issue of whether she has the permission-right to do so freely does not arise.” Wolterstorff, this volume, p. 218, n. 49.

<sup>5</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1987 [1957]).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006); Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2009); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004).

Central to the Enlightenment was a broad and incisive critique of religion, fueled by fresh memories of Europe's sanguinary Wars of Religion, the tyranny of the day's reigning theocracies, and the nascent but profound revelations of modern science. On the one hand, these converging factors gave rise to a fervent anticlericalism that opposed the unbridled political authority of religious institutions.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the Enlightenment engineered a major paradigm shift with respect to religion and its role vis-à-vis society. At the risk of oversimplification, one can nevertheless generalize that throughout most of Western history, religion and religious truth had been a taken-for-granted cornerstone – or canopy, to use a different metaphor – of individual, social, and political life.<sup>8</sup> But the Enlightenment paradigm upended this prevailing norm with the development of two mutually constituting but dialectically opposed ideas: “religion” and “modernity.” Religion came to be defined as essentially irrational, superstitious, despotic, and regressive, in contradistinction to “modernity,” which signified the domain of reason, science, freedom, peace, economic prosperity, and universal human progress. Religion came to embody a dystopian past, while modernity assumed the symbolism of an idealized and inevitable future. Where religion lingered in the so-called “modern” world, it did so as an anachronism, a vestige of humanity's primitive origins quivering in dynamic tension with a world that is and must be, by its very nature, hostile to religion's presence. With modernity and religion locked in mutual opposition, and with the arc of history trending inexorably towards modernity, the demise of religion appeared a foregone conclusion.

Perhaps no-one anticipated the demise of religion with more breathtaking confidence than the French philosophe Nicolas de Condorcet in his *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795). For Condorcet, modernity first dawned during the Renaissance, for it was then that “the sciences and philosophy threw off the yoke of authority” – by which he meant, of course, theological and ecclesiastical authority. And reason's complete global triumph is only a matter of time.

<sup>7</sup> The legacy of Enlightenment anticlericalism appears, paradigmatically, in French *laïcité*, but also in other models of secularism that seek to contain, or privatize, religion.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Knopf, 1968); and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

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[E]very thing seems to be preparing the speedy downfall of the religions of the East, which, partaking of the abjectness of their ministers, left almost exclusively to the people, and, in the majority of countries, considered by powerful men as political institutions only, no longer threaten to retain human reason in a state of hopeless bondage, and in the eternal shackles of infancy . . . Then will arrive the moment in which the sun will observe in its course free nations only, acknowledging no other master than their reason; in which tyrants and slaves, priests and their stupid or hypocritical instruments, will no longer exist but in history and upon the stage; in which our only concern will be to lament their past victims and dupes, and, by the recollection of their horrid enormities, to exercise a vigilant circumspection, that we may be able instantly to recognise and effectually to stifle by the force of reason, the seeds of superstition and tyranny, should they ever presume again to make their appearance upon the earth.<sup>9</sup>

This assumption of religion's inevitable demise – in which “priests and their stupid or hypocritical instruments, will no longer exist but in history and upon the stage” – persisted among many Enlightenment thinkers as a taken-for-granted and almost subliminal doctrine, so effortless in its certitude that it scarcely needed explication. Indeed, it had become such an article of Enlightenment faith that Tocqueville, for example, could observe that the eighteenth-century philosophers brimmed with the simple confidence that “[r]eligious zeal . . . will be extinguished as freedom and enlightenment increase.”<sup>10</sup> In the early- to mid-twentieth century, this predictive assumption began to receive systematic attention from a new generation of social scientists who sought to elaborate and explain the precise mechanisms of religion's “inevitable” extinction through new social scientific theories and methodologies. Over the twentieth century, this effort generated a vibrant scholarly paradigm and school of thought that came to be known as secularization theory.

The “theory of secularization,” in fact, refers not to one theory, but to a diverse array of theories, each of which postulates some type – and often very different types – of religious decline. Like the Enlightenment critique of religion, these theories generally presuppose a fundamental incompatibility between religion and modernity. But unlike the Enlightenment critique, in which religious decline was *implicit* in an overarching religion–modernity dialectic, secularization theory sought to offer a systematic description and explanation of religious decline in terms of identifiable

<sup>9</sup> Marquis de and Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas Caritat Condorcet, *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (Philadelphia: Lang and Ultick, 1795).

<sup>10</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper & Row, 1988 [1835, 1840]).

social, political, economic, and psychological processes.<sup>11</sup> Some secularization theories predict that the advancement of science and technology undermines religion's core metaphysical claims, thereby rendering religious belief cognitively hopeless.<sup>12</sup> Some posit that economic development and improved material well-being lead to decreased religiosity.<sup>13</sup> In other cases, secularization theories pivot on the idea of *structural differentiation*, the theory that religion declines as society fragments into discrete compartments or spheres. And from the theory of structural differentiation, still others extrapolate secularization as religious *privatization*, according to which religion, confined to a single differentiated sphere, is forced to retreat from public life and take up residence on the margins of society.<sup>14</sup>

Despite these and other theoretical variations, secularization theory's common denominator has been an effort to outline the conditions, mechanisms, and parameters of a presupposed religious decline. What "decline" means may differ from theory to theory.<sup>15</sup> But most retain an unflagging assumption that some sort of decline is on the horizon, if not already here, drawing closer and closer in lockstep with secular modernity. The sociologist of religion Peter Berger gave this assumption paradigmatic expression when in 1968 he predicted – with a confidence that recalled Condorcet – that "by the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture."<sup>16</sup>

Now well into the second decade of the twenty-first century, however, it is hard to see evidence of an irresistible, "worldwide secular culture," or the reduction of the world's believers into small, isolated sects. (To his credit, Berger long ago abandoned his commitment to secularization as a

<sup>11</sup> For an analytical overview and critique of secularization theories, see Timothy Samuel Shah, "Secular Militancy as an Obstacle to Peacebuilding," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, eds. Atalia Omer, R. Scott Appleby, and David Little (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 380–406.

<sup>12</sup> See Berger, *Sacred Canopy*.

<sup>13</sup> Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> See Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

<sup>15</sup> For instance, religious decline might refer to an erosion of influence or authority at the level of individuals, societies, or institutions. See Karel Dobbeleere, "Bryan Wilson's Contributions to the Study of Secularization," *Social Compass* 53 (2006): 141–146.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Berger, "A Bleak Outlook is Seen for Religion," *The New York Times*, February 25, 1968, p. 3.

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description or prediction of modern global reality, as we note below.) To the contrary, for instance, a recent Pew study reports that 5.8 billion people – or 84 percent of the world’s population – affiliate themselves with one religion or another.<sup>17</sup> Although some indicators of decreased religiosity have undoubtedly been documented in certain regions, such as in the nations of industrialized Europe and, more recently, in North America,<sup>18</sup> global religiosity remains decidedly high, and in some cases, resurgent. The rise of Pentecostal Evangelicalism in Latin America, Asia and Africa, of political Islam in North Africa and the Middle East, and of Hindu nationalism in India, offer just a few examples of socially and politically consequential religious resurgence that vex the traditional narrative of secularization.<sup>19</sup>

What this suggests is that history does not march to a uniform, linear beat of *secularization*. Rather, it moves dynamically and unpredictably to the protean rhythms of religious *transformation*, whereby religion is not necessarily in decline, but constantly in flux. In recent years, appreciation of this important nuance has prompted many erstwhile champions of secularization theory to lose faith in its explanatory potential.<sup>20</sup> Even Berger, though an influential secularization theorist in the 1960s, demonstrated uncommon scholarly humility in 1998 when he acknowledged that “the world today . . . is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature

<sup>17</sup> Pew Research Center, “The Global Religious Landscape: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Major Religious Groups as of 2010,” December 2012, [www.pewforum.org/files/2014/01/global-religion-full.pdf](http://www.pewforum.org/files/2014/01/global-religion-full.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> For instance, see Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape: Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow,” May 12, 2015, <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2015/05/RLS-08-26-full-report.pdf>. The study found that religiously unaffiliated American adults – persons eighteen years or older who identify as atheist, agnostic or “noting in particular” – now make up 22.8 percent of the national population, a six-point increase since 2007.

<sup>19</sup> For one account of religion’s highly public and politically consequential resurgence around the world, see Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Samuel Shah, *God’s Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> For instance, see Rodney Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.,” *Sociology of Religion* 60 (1999): 249–273. Others are more apprehensive about a wholesale withdrawal from secularization theory. For example, see Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Casanova argues that secularization theory is actually comprised of three distinct theses: (1) decline in religious beliefs and practices, (2) religious privatization, and (3) the differentiation of spheres. He rejects theses (1) and (2), but maintains that thesis (3) is still tenable.

by historians and social scientists loosely labeled ‘secularization theory’ is essentially mistaken.”<sup>21</sup>

Where does this leave us? The aim here is not to engage in polemics against secularization theory but to bring critical attention to the assumptions that undergird its theoretical infrastructure. And it is precisely these assumptions that scholarly exploration of the “naturalness of religion” invites us to interrogate from a fresh perspective. Following the Enlightenment critique of religion, as we have seen, secularization theory presupposes that religion is inherently irrational, superstitious, and anti-modern. Just as important, however, is that secularization theory presupposes that religion is a contingent product of culture and society. On this assumption, religion enjoys no enduring connection to human nature or experience, much less human flourishing, but thrives only when a narrow set of artificial conditions and supports are in place. Remove these conditions and supports – think of Condorcet’s “priests and their stupid or hypocritical instruments” – and religion will suffer a “speedy downfall” (Condorcet again). The implication is that religion is an inessential and indeed temporary facet of the human condition that is doomed in the face of the comprehensive and revolutionary transformations wrought by modernity. While religion may have once seemed necessary, intrinsic, and *natural*, it becomes optional, extraneous, and *unnatural* when humanity shakes off the “shackles” of tradition, and human beings appear for the first time on the stage of history in their natural and pristine form as “unencumbered selves.”<sup>22</sup>

If religion is not constitutive of “humanness,” however, and if it is primed to evanesce in the face of an ever-approaching modernity, then we must wonder about what seems to be the stubborn persistence of religion in the modern world. What can explain that? What is more, how do we

<sup>21</sup> Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Washington: Eerdmans/Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999), 2.

<sup>22</sup> The phrase is Michael Sandel’s and is at the heart of his critique of John Rawls’s *Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971). To summarize, Sandel’s critique is that Rawls’ liberal theory of justice is based on a metaphysical view that human beings are essentially “unencumbered” – i.e., not essentially constituted by their religious and moral commitments, including their commitments to the good, but essentially separate from, and prior to, these commitments as individualist and instrumentalist choosers in a marketplace. See Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988 [1982]).



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square the enduring presence of religion, or some manifestation thereof, in all cultures throughout human history?<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps, as this volume explores, the answer lies in religion's naturalness. Could it be that religion has survived the advent of modernization because it arises, not by accident or from contingent circumstances that obtain one moment and disappear the next, but from capacities and dispositions that are intrinsic to human nature and persist, albeit in different forms, across time and space?

### Naturalness of Religion and Religious Freedom

If religion is indeed natural, how – if at all – does this bear on the idea of a natural or human right to religious freedom? Does the naturalness of religion generate *ipso facto* a corresponding right to religious freedom; one that all people possess by virtue of their humanity?

At first glance, the notion that a natural or human right to religious freedom logically follows from religion's naturalness encounters the problem, most famously raised by philosopher David Hume,<sup>24</sup> of deriving an “ought” from an “is.” Hume maintained that empirical observations are value-free, and therefore cannot, by themselves, generate prescriptive or moral claims, such as rights, duties, obligations, codes of conduct, or any similar ethical norms. Along this line of reasoning, “naturalness,” as an empirical observation, merely describes how the world *is*; it does not prescribe how it *ought* to be. To assign value on the basis of naturalness would be to make an unjustified deductive leap. It would be, in Hume's estimation, to commit the logical fallacy of deriving an “ought” from an “is.” Accordingly, the naturalness of religion cannot by itself generate a normative claim about a right to religious freedom. In order for people to have such a right, the Humean argument would insist, religion or the assertion of its naturalness must also be accompanied by some sort of normative principle – for instance, that religion is a basic human good, and goods should be safeguarded and promoted. But if this is the case, does religion derive its goodness from its naturalness? If not, then naturalness is irrelevant to the equation; some other factor must be responsible for the good of religion that

<sup>23</sup> For one excellent discussion of religion's remarkable persistence across human history, which also offers to explain this persistence, see Martin Riesebrödt, *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, Book III, Section I, available at: [www.gutenberg.org/files/4705/4705-h/4705-h.htm#link2H\\_4\\_0085](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4705/4705-h/4705-h.htm#link2H_4_0085).

generates the right to religious freedom. If so, then a further principle is needed to bridge the gap between naturalness and rights – for instance, that what is natural is ipso facto good, valuable, and therefore worth protecting. But such a principle is question-begging, for it supposes that religion derives its goodness from its naturalness, while defining naturalness as necessarily good. And the principle raises still more undercutting questions: what does it mean to be “natural?” Is immoral, but otherwise seemingly “natural,” behavior – such as dishonesty, violence, or oppression – thereby sanctioned? And by the same token, are things that we value, but which do not appear particularly natural or easily sustained – such as absence of suffering, peace, or democracy – therefore unworthy of protection? From the Humean perspective, religion must be proven to have value for human beings and their societies, but such a value must necessarily be independent of any putative naturalness.

On the other hand, and without dispensing with the Humean argument, there may nonetheless be a compelling *prima facie* and practical case for deriving a right to religious freedom from religion’s naturalness. What if religion were not simply natural but also *fundamental* and *intrinsic* in some way to human nature and experience? If religion were natural to human beings in this sense, religion would be at the core of human life: so much so that suppressing it – depriving human beings of their freedom to exercise religion – would necessarily run against the grain of human nature and therefore require extreme and sustained coercion. Such coercion would not only be extreme and probably violent in itself, but it would presumably elicit a violent and reactive backlash, all of which would perpetuate human suffering and stifle progress.<sup>25</sup> As cognitive scientists Roger Trigg and Justin Barrett point out, “one of the most important facts that CSR [cognitive science of religion] draws attention to is that religion is not a private and idiosyncratic phenomenon with no place on the public stage. It is there at the heart of human activity,” which means that “religion cannot, and must not, be ignored in public life . . . The more religion is privatized and thought to be beyond the scope of public, rational discussion, the more it will fester and break out in all kinds of unpredictable and undesirable ways.”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> For a powerful argument that secular schemes of national “liberation” have often invited a strong religious backlash, see the recent illuminating study by Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

<sup>26</sup> Roger Trigg and Justin Barrett, introduction to *The Roots of Religion: Exploring the Cognitive Science of Religion*, eds. Trigg and Barrett (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 10.