

**DIVERSE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES  
AND FIRST ORDER RELIGIOUS BELIEFS:  
A RESPONSE TO BRANDEN THORNHILL-MILLER,  
PETER MILLICAN AND JANUSZ SALAMON**

**S. MARK HEIM**

*Yale Divinity School*

The distinctive element in Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican's article<sup>1</sup> is their contention that empirical research in cognitive science can reshape the philosophical argument over supernaturalist religious beliefs. With reference to such research, they restate Hume's critique in terms they believe persuasively challenge the rationality of most forms of supernatural belief – a "common-core diversity dilemma." Similar research however leads them also to recognize that supernatural beliefs have significant empirical personal and social benefits, rooted in normal cognitive processes, and that these benefits are unlikely to be widely available in the foreseeable future apart from such beliefs. This leads to a "normal/objective dilemma" which asks how much weight should be accorded these benefits in a rational assessment of the validity of religious beliefs. They propose a path of reconciliation in which the rational acceptance of a "second order" religiosity is combined with a frank rejection of the supernatural claims of first order religions. This alternative is preferable to a strict skepticism because of its presumed ability to maintain the benefits of religious beliefs (while minimizing their costs) and because it is presumed to provide an additional benefit, that of reducing the virulence of both naturalist-supernaturalist debate and inter-religious conflict. This would free energy for a more

---

<sup>1</sup> Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican, "The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma: Revisions of Humean Thought, New Empirical Research, and the Limits of Rational Religious Belief", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 7, no. 1 (2015), 1-49.

“cooperation-and-humility-enhancing understanding of religious diversity in a tense and precarious globalized age.”

My paper responds to this proposal under two main heads. In regard to the common-core diversity dilemma, I argue that consideration of religious experience (as opposed to a particular understanding of miracle claims alone) undermines the skeptical effect of the dilemma. Diversity of religious and soteriological experiences need not disqualify first order religious claims if they are understood not as conflicting causal claims but logically compatible empirical outcomes, i.e. as combining a “common core” supernaturalist belief with religious outcomes in part constituted by evaluative choices. In regard to the normal/objective dilemma, I argue that empirical cognitive research suggests the benefits attribute to religious belief are most closely associated with first order religion, and their proposal faces not only the practical problem of being unacceptable to most religious people but an internal contradiction. Cognitive research is not yet at a point to play the conclusive role TMM assume, and even in its current state it suggests a more complex relation between first order and second order religion than TMM’s “model of the moon” allows.

Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican (hereafter TMM) model a philosophical framework that promises “progress in interreligious dialogue and in the naturalism/supernaturalism debate,” a progress to be judged at least in part by the practical standard that it will provide a “more cooperation-and humility-enhancing understanding of religious diversity in a tense and precarious global age.”<sup>2</sup> The attainment of that end is a good that could rationally justify countenancing a certain number of questionably rational religious beliefs, should those beliefs themselves be of net practical benefit for individual and social life. Their argument turns on the premise that recent empirical research in the cognitive sciences decisively shifts the ground in traditional debates.

That empirical research buttresses the naturalist’s argument in the form of a “common-core/diversity dilemma.” Hume’s maxim on miracles states that one can be accepted only if its occurrence is more probable than false testimony on the part of those that assert it. TMM say Hume’s maxim can be restated with even greater force by reference to the realm of empirical psychology.<sup>3</sup> Given research that indicates a predilection

---

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 12-13.

in human cognition toward identifying agents and intentionality, to the point of too-readily crediting invisible agents, the probability of generating false reports specifically about the action of invisible agents is so great that it sets an extremely high bar for miracle verification.<sup>4</sup> Though in theory the cumulative total of miraculous reports from all religious (and non-religious) sources could be weighed against this standard, the apologist for religion faces a difficult dilemma. If a witness contends that a miracle supports the distinctive beliefs of one religion as opposed to others, then cumulative reports become warring data that cancels itself out. If one wishes to appeal to the cumulative data as support for supernatural possibilities generically over against pure naturalism, then one must face the first argument regarding a cognitive predilection biased toward the production of just such phenomena as a class. This is the “Common-core/diversity dilemma” (hereafter CCDD), newly sharpened by cognitive research, that suggests strict skepticism toward religion.

TMM recognize that the empirical research already referenced demonstrates that particularly religion-friendly cognitive faculties are thoroughly normal features of our nature.<sup>5</sup> As such, it is neither realistic nor wise to contemplate their near term eradication. Though naturalists argue the religious expression fostered by these faculties exceeds their epistemologically appropriate domains and exacts real costs in religious conflicts or obscurity, they need to acknowledge that there are significant empirical individual and social benefits of religious adherence that must also be weighed. Thus there may be a rational argument for preserving the benefits of (even irrational) religious belief while avoiding as far as possible its negative effects. This is the “Normal/Objective Dilemma” (hereafter NOD) that is posed to the naturalist: if the psychological causes of religious belief are part of normal mental function and produce various positive outcomes, “should these rationally weigh more heavily with us than objective epistemological considerations would allow?”<sup>6</sup> The force of this dilemma can be made even more pressing if it is advanced on behalf of a “second order” religion, one that abandons the “competing dogmatism of first-order supernaturalism” and instead falls back on an “undogmatic version of its second-order cousin.”<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, 37-39.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, 40.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, 46.

Together, these two dilemmas pose a meta-dilemma, requiring some kind of trade off. TMM contend that the CCDD is even more devastating of first order supernatural beliefs than Hume's original arguments. But this is less true when applied to "second order" supernaturalism, a belief directed to an ultimate, guiding power behind the general structures of the world (a source "distant and unknowable") whose existence is functionally irrelevant for the causal understanding of any question science might address. Such a supernaturalism would be least affected by the CCDD and so best situated to enjoy the support of the NOD.<sup>8</sup> That rational case for the human psychological benefits of religion can be supplemented with a "thin" evidential case for the existence of a religious object, based on the fine tuning of the universe argument.<sup>9</sup>

Balancing these elements, TMM see a path toward reconciliation of religion and reason. This path has the benefit over the strictly skeptical one that it holds promise for mitigating both the conflict among religions and the conflict between naturalism and religion. It would do the first because second order religion recognizes all first order religious beliefs are cultural and relative and provide no basis for inter-group contestation. It would do the second because its particular formulation of NOD would carry convincing weight with rationalists. Insofar as acceptance of this path of reconciliation has a reasonable prospect to actually diminish conflict among religions or between rationalists and believers, that specific benefit would be one more rational reason to accept the reconciliation and its approval of religion on a cost/benefit analysis of its psychological impact.

TMM make a thoughtful and engaging case. They are surely correct that cognitive research will be increasingly important to philosophical discussion, prompting rational assessment of specific topics in light of empirical information about how our minds are constrained to think about them. I am less certain than TMM that cognitive research as yet can change the discussion as much as they suggest.<sup>10</sup> On balance, I think that research actually tells against key aspects of their proposal. My comments will focus first on the question of the diversity of religious

---

<sup>8</sup> For description of second order religion, see for instance *ibid.* 46.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, 47.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance the wide-ranging assessment of work in this area and its implications by Wesley Wildman in Wesley Wildman, "The Significance of the Evolution of Religious Belief and Behavior for Religious Studies and Theology" in *Where God and Science Meet* ed. Patrick McNamara (Praeger, 2006).

experience in relation to the CCDD and second on the relation between first and second order supernaturalist beliefs in light of cognitive research.

#### RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES AND THE DIVERSITY DILEMMA

My contribution in many ways supplements Janusz Salamon's response. Despite his appreciation for their dialogical approach and support for their aim, he gives a crisp summary of what he finds lacking in TMM's proposal:

... unless we want to engage in an implausible argument which starts with an admission that religion may after all be 'natural' because it does not seem to go away, and end with a recommendation that it should be replaced with a second-order religion which lacks nearly all the relevant characteristics of first-order religions to which billions of people adhere, we have to accept that religious belief has to, above all, shed light on the question of the ultimate meaning of human existence, and this by reference to human values, not merely facts about the physical universe. For this reason, religious belief cannot lack soteriological/eschatological, metanoetic/transformational, relational/inter-subjective and other existentially relevant aspects, or else it is unlikely to appeal to adherents of first-order religions.<sup>11</sup>

Because their proposal "misconstrues the nature and ground of religious belief," Salamon expects it to find little resonance among religious believers and so to do little to mitigate conflict, a relevant point since TMM base the rationality of the proposal in part on benefits of this sort.<sup>12</sup> He accepts their critique of an evidentialist approach to grounding religion, but suggests a different epistemological basis, one that he believes can achieve what they want while "being a great deal less revisionist than their second order religion and showing that abandoning fundamental beliefs that are central to one's first order religious tradition is not a prerequisite of holding a rational religious belief under the condition of religious pluralism."<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Janusz Salamon, "Atheism and Agatheism in the Global Ethical Discourse: Reply to Millican and Thornhill-Miller", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 7, no. 4 (2015), 226.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 197.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

Salamon proposes an alternative epistemological defense of first order religious beliefs, an axiological grounding. He views religion as rooted in a sense of supreme good (*Agatheos*). Religious faith ascribes to ultimate reality the function of being the ground and end of all that is good. This is a “supernatural” belief (by virtue of the transcendent character of its object), based on the teleological and value-laden nature of our self-consciousness, an empirical fact.<sup>14</sup> The phenomenal common core of religion is deployment of this category of good (wider than theism, say, which is one particular way of describing the good and its basis) and the belief in its instantiation in trans-mundane reality.<sup>15</sup> So religious belief is grounded in our value-laden consciousnesses, and our sensibility of a dramatic gap between our current state and the realization of this greater good. Since it is “not possible to derive values solely from the facts about the physical universe,” religion cannot be adequately assessed on that basis alone, as TMM’s approach tends to do.<sup>16</sup>

Evidential arguments for God’s existence, like the fine tuning argument, do not necessarily imply an absolute with the religious qualities of a morally and teleologically supreme good. Salamon views this point as fatal to TMM’s project, since it divorces their second level religion from the entire soteriological dimension at the heart of actual religion. He offers to rectify this problem, suggesting that the only way to ground religious belief in an ultimate endowed with agathological attributes is “by reasoning from human axiological consciousness to God as the ultimate good, towards which that consciousness is ultimately directed.”<sup>17</sup> Given such grounding, there can be a “justificatory descent” so that (for theists, for instance) particular beliefs such as that God offers

---

<sup>14</sup> Salamon’s view on the nature of religious experience can find support in some cognitive research of the type TMM commend, which suggests that it is just such axiological “meaning making” that can be key to certain psychological benefits of religion. See for instance Michael Inzlicht, Alexa M. Tullett, and Marie Good, “The Need to Believe: A Neuroscience Account of Religion as a Motivated Process,” *Religion, Brain and Behavior* 1, no. 3 (2011).

<sup>15</sup> Salamon acknowledges there are non-religious ways to define the good and to constitute values, and there are views that contest the very possibility of an answer to the agathonic question. These may be non-religious in rejecting any ultimate source or definition of the good, but they likewise address the existential question of human values and action. In this respect, Salamon’s axiological formulation offers a framework for common conversation about the good of the sort TMM desire, involving both religious and non-religious perspectives.

<sup>16</sup> Salamon, “Atheism and Agatheism in the Global Ethical Discourse ...”, 201.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, 211.

revelation to rational creatures can be inferred (i.e. if God is source of ultimate good, it is reasonable to expect God might have these qualities). Salamon suggests that a “ladder “of justification descends from such ultimate agathological beliefs to these more particular beliefs in first order religion.<sup>18</sup>

Religious belief systems are expressions of different visions of what their adherents consider to be the optimal ways of conceiving human potentialities vis-a-vis the ultimate reality as the ultimate good toward which their existence is directed.<sup>19</sup> They are of a piece with a search for individual transformation (toward greater realization of the personal good), an extension of that good into social and historical relations (including those with nature), and a hope for collective and universal fulfillment of the good (eschatology). This existential import is essential to religion. Like moral beliefs, religious ones are formed in connection with thinking about human good, and in this sphere “nothing more than agathological certainty, plus coherence of one’s worldview, may be expected and demanded.”<sup>20</sup> Choosing a religious option that “identifies the ultimate good with the Absolute religiously conceived ... may be as rational a choice as any.”<sup>21</sup> From Salamon’s perspective, this means that the naturalist and the religious believer are placed epistemically “on par” when the appropriate frame of reference of each is considered. They are “on par” with regard to “the rationality of their worldviews to the extent all worldviews contain a central component that has an axiological and teleological nature, and as such gives rise to questions regarding subjectively relevant meaning and conduct of human life which cannot be settled by natural science.”<sup>22</sup> Salamon argues that agatheism can provide many of the advantages TMM see in second order religion (because it is less invested in evidence of supernatural action in the physical realm), while attracting support from believers because it acknowledges their existential concerns.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> What rational religion of this sort rules out as irrational would be beliefs not rooted in a notion of supreme good (so ungrounded in that way) or inconsistent with the type of supreme good axiologically assumed (so incoherent). It is possible to argue about which among competing versions of supreme good are most encompassing or consistent, but impossible to reach an absolute conclusion based on reason alone.

<sup>19</sup> Salamon, “Atheism and Agatheism in the Global Ethical Discourse...”, 203.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, 207.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, 204.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, 205.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, 204.

Salamon defends the rationality of some first order religious beliefs, a class TMM would like to defuse in its entirety. These beliefs are particular (God speaks to us) rather than general (there is a power behind the universe). They also have an unconditioned or immediate character, whose legitimacy Salamon likewise defends. Such beliefs could neither be generated or widely received except by being recognized by their adherents as the “optimal way of conceiving the nature of the Absolute and its relation to the world and humanity,” an approximation to a God’s eye view, worthy of unconditional devotion.<sup>24</sup> Any believer’s beliefs will likely reflect the existential conditions they have experienced, but this does not contradict “each believer’s conviction that his belief is an optimal expression of truth about God *available to him*, because a believer has no other option but to rely on his *present* agathological intuitions regarding the nature of God and God’s relation to the world and humanity.”<sup>25</sup>

However, though the object of this belief is supernatural and the quality of the belief has an unconditioned character, the content of the particular beliefs is in fact variable, because the agathological imagination with which people construe or recognize their supreme good is itself shaped by on-going experiences. This can only result in an historical process in which the transformative experiences of believers may reframe the imaginations with which they perceive the ultimate good and infer support for particular beliefs. This accounts for the diversity among and within religious traditions.<sup>26</sup> The certainty specific to religious beliefs may be perceived subjectively and shared inter-subjectively, since it applies to the axiological and soteriological worlds and to the category of supreme good. But it need not be confused with an objective certainty in regard to the “middle range” realities of the physical and scientific worlds. If first order religious beliefs are understood in this way, Salamon suggests, they are not bound to be a breeding ground for irrationality or conflict.

We are now in a position to see Salamon’s response to the common-core/diversity dilemma. As he sees it the common core of religions is the agathonic task. Insofar as religious experiences evidence “common core” characteristics, they can be taken as supporting the agathonic

---

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, 232.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, 233.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 231-32.

project and its presumption of an ultimate source of the good. Insofar as various religious or mystical experiences explicitly confirm or conform to different first order religious convictions, they do not cancel out their “common core” evidential value, but point to the importance of the characterizations of the supreme good brought to these experiences. Fundamental agathetic belief may “constitute the epistemic foundation of a number of different religious belief systems.”<sup>27</sup> Religious diversity stems from the different ways the nature of supreme good can be framed and particular beliefs can be inferred or organized in relation to it. Agathological imagination will play a crucial role in choosing between religious and non-religious options as well as among different types of religious goods. Diversity of religious systems is a space of exercise of agathological imagination, a dimension of the faculty of practical reason directed towards the ultimate good (in a transcendental Kantian sense)<sup>28</sup> (202) There is a range of religious “landscapes” that have been “conceived throughout human history by geniuses of agathological imagination.”<sup>29</sup> (204) This means that belonging to a first order religious tradition, and affirming its particular beliefs, insofar as they are derived from the sense of supreme good in that tradition, is consistent “with adhering to the fundamental agatheistic belief, despite there being a *plurality* of such *evolving* religious traditions.”<sup>30</sup> In short, Salamon concludes, “we have a ‘common core’ and diversity, but no dilemma.”<sup>31</sup>

I want to reinforce this point. TMM do not directly address the religious experiences Salamon views as central. Their paradigm case of is that of miracles, similar allegedly supernatural events that religious reports attribute to mutually exclusive supernatural causes or associate with incompatible beliefs. To the extent this miracle shows one supernatural cause is real, that miracle shows a competing cause or explanation is real. TMM show that, logically speaking, divergent miracle reports could still lead to a rational presumption in favor of supernaturalist possibilities over pure naturalism. But this move offers no support for one particularist religious view against another, and in fact could as well be seen as supporting polytheism. It requires believers to appeal

---

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, 231.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, 202.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 204.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, 234.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, 245.

to the support of “common core” evidence, which then places them in line for that horn of the CCDD.<sup>32</sup> Whether or not this is an adequate treatment of miracles, it is severely lacking in regard to the soteriological religious experiences Salamon stresses.<sup>33</sup> It is not clear that diversity here can be treated the same way. Different conceptions of a divine good agree on the categorical nature and the ultimacy of their object. They are *consistent* testimony in a way that Hume’s characterization of miracle reports (as claims that attribute identical *causality* for identical events to mutually exclusive agents) denies they can be.

I argue that the diversity aspect of the CCDD is misconceived in its assumption that a variety of concrete religious experiences necessarily imply skepticism about the differing particulars. I suggest that religious experiences stand in relation with different types of actual religious fulfilment, states that may have both an eschatological, perfected form and anticipatory, historical expressions.<sup>34</sup> Varying states of religious fulfilment may have factors in common – absence of suffering, for instance. But they also have distinguishing characteristics. For a Christian these might be an experience of personal communion with God and Christ; for a native American these might be a permanent unity and harmony with ancestors and a specific landscape. For a Buddhist these might involve a realization of emptiness. There may be key elements in each of these that are fully incompatible with or unnecessary for the others. But there is no contradiction in affirming that several such fulfilments or ends are actually achievable, and experienced in their particularity by adherents. The “conflict” is not logical but existential,

---

<sup>32</sup> This dilemma is especially telling as directed against arguments that limit themselves exclusively to “common core” evidence. An example would be John Hick’s argument in support of religious belief, since he regards only the common elements of religion as of epistemic value. Supporters of Hick’s view would respond to the CCDD by contesting the force of the naturalist explanations of common elements, but would essentially concede that diversity yields contradiction. See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).

<sup>33</sup> TMM simply extend the miracle paradigm to all religious experience. Thornhill-Miller and Millican, “The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma...”, 19.

<sup>34</sup> I have set out this view at much greater length elsewhere. Here I want to stress only ways in which it runs strongly parallel with Salamon’s argument with regard to religious diversity. My discussion of multiple religious fulfilments corresponds in large measure to his treatment of different agathonic goods, and my emphasis on the evaluative dimension of religious faith corresponds in large part to his description of agathonological imagination. See S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion, Faith Meets Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995).

the impossibility of some conditions being true at the same time for the same person. Even where the states or experiences reported in different religious cases are so distinct that they could not possibly be realized by the same people at the same time, they do not become contradictory – in Hume’s evidential sense – unless we assume that only one kind of human religious fulfillment is possible in relation to the divine, which may interact with humanity only to one effect. That is itself a religious doctrine, open to debate, and neither a logical or empirical given. That is no indication that the particulars of distinct religious realizations are not real or that they have not been achieved in relation to the same object.<sup>35</sup>

In this respect, the claimed realization of concretely different religious fulfillments are mutually supportive in pointing to non-naturalist possibilities but much less vulnerable to the common core horn of CCDD. TMM dismiss consideration of such “polytheism” primarily by assuming that religious believers would refuse to compromise their exclusive claims with such an outlook. But this seems questionable. This approach is actually embodied wherever forms of multiple religious practice occur (Buddhist-Confucian, Muslim-Christian, Jewish-Buddhist), since the premise of such practice must be that there are features of fulfillment in one path not available in another. When a Buddhist expresses the belief that faithful Christians will go to heaven precisely as they expect, but that this heaven will be a period of reward in a continuing cycle of rebirths, the factual conflicts about empirical expectations are much smaller than the evaluative divergences.<sup>36</sup> Though I cannot elaborate further in this setting, the primary point is that diversity *per se* need not have the implications that Hume and TMM presume, and thus cannot play its appointed role in the CCDD.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> In their own internal reflections, religions recognize this of different valid spiritual paths, not all of which can attain the same ends, and in many cases extend a similar kind of analysis to cases within other religions. This is the case for instance with Buddhist views of different vehicles or skillful means, and Christian ideas of natural knowledge of God or progressive revelation.

<sup>36</sup> Such is the stated view of the Dalai Lama, for instance. See Dalai Lama, “The Bodhgaya Interviews,” in *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes*, ed. Paul J. Griffiths (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 169.

<sup>37</sup> It is true that different religious fulfillments may presume metaphysical conditions incompatible with those presumed in another fulfillment (existence of God, illusion of self, etc.), and in these respects the religions pose alternative accounts. How to explain the others from the perspective of one of these alternatives is a theological question. Here the point is that that disagreement does not necessarily extend to the concrete realities

TMM's CCDD can be challenged on several accounts. Its claim that there is no rational justification for first order religious beliefs to compete with naturalistic critiques is countered by Salamon's axiological grounding. Its account of religious experience does not attend to the soteriological themes central to religion. Its formulation of the diversity horn of the dilemma overlooks the way in which distinctly different religious experiences can be credited and not cancelled. For these reasons, the CCDD is not able to carry the weight that TMM attribute to it. We turn now to the normal/objective dilemma.

### THE LIMITATIONS OF SECOND ORDER RELIGION

As TMM observe, Hume is not clear on how to resolve the impasse between the strict rationality required for judgements of truth and the irrational instinct necessary for actual life in the absence of certainty, what we might call Hume's dilemma.<sup>38</sup> Their essay intends to be responsive to this concern. Salamon suggests that what Hume treats as instincts (and so as irrational) can be known in light of research to be "in fact facets of the proper functioning of our complex cognitive faculties that ultimately aim at truth and thus are not irrational, despite the fact that we are not able to establish in an internal fashion whether and to what degree the beliefs produced in such a way are warranted."<sup>39</sup>

TMM recognize the epistemic naturalness of our religion-forming capacities, primarily with reference to the difficulty this presents in implementing a strict rationalism. Of course skeptics have long noted, as Hume so pithily does, that humans have a ready love of 'surprise and wonder.'<sup>40</sup> But it has equally long been an assumption that there was or could be an inverse relation between the qualities of mind that incline in that direction (superstition, to Hume) and rational qualities of mind. TMM do make a major change in the naturalist's case by explicitly dropping the contention that religious belief is *per se* a mental pathology, either in genesis (caused by some kind of deformity in our mental equipment) or in practice (marking its adherents as necessarily deficient

---

of the experienced soteriological fulfillments, which can be viewed as valid from varying perspectives on the ultimate.

<sup>38</sup> Thornhill-Miller and Millican, "The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma...", 5.

<sup>39</sup> Janusz Salamon, "Atheism and Agatheism in the Global Ethical Discourse...", 206.

<sup>40</sup> Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican, "The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma..." *ibid.*, 13.

in human accomplishments or satisfactions). Naturalists have charged believers with being “cognitively challenged” because of a mental bias toward supernatural ideas. The charge is sometimes reversed, and nonbelievers charged with mental deficits in the areas of theory of mind or empathy. TMM note that the data do not seem to support mental disability in either group, and report that they incline toward the view that religious belief can be partly explained by a “*preference* for an intuitive, as opposed to analytical cognitive *style*” rather than differences in ability.<sup>41</sup>

This is a suggestive observation, that bears on the assumption that rationality and its qualities of mind, as opposed to religious faith, and its qualities of mind, can vary in inverse proportion almost without limit. One of the striking things about the research in question is its increasingly detailed picture of the intertwined nature of the qualities of mind we are discussing. It was common, for instance, for some naturalists to argue for an inverse proportion in the exercise of emotion and reason. But it seems increasingly clear that emotion is an integral element in the way “higher” human reason works. As Anthony Damasio writes, though emotions can distort our reason, “the *absence* of emotion and feeling is no less damaging, no less capable of compromising the rationality that makes us distinctively human and allows us to decide in consonance with a sense of personal future, social convention and moral principle.”<sup>42</sup> Damasio’s work stressed particularly the importance of emotion as a shorthand for collapsing numerous steps of reasoning or an illuminator to focus rational processes in fruitful areas.

TMM do not focus primarily on emotion but on cognitive capacities such as the theory of mind (our ability to attribute mental states to other beings) and our hypersensitivity for pattern or agent detection. These qualities of mind are so essential and valuable for life in a social world that we are primed to deploy them in any and all circumstances, and so to posit invisible, intentional agents like ghosts or gods. They figure in TMM’s discussion of religion entirely as a source of bias. In a footnote, TMM acknowledge that the Normal/Objective Dilemma could equally well be stated another way than they do. It could be stated as involving a “choice between being more humanly ‘normal’ (by being irrational or biased in some respect), and being more ‘objective,’ ‘rational,’ or

---

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, 38.

<sup>42</sup> Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes’ Error : Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1994), xii.

‘unbiased’ (and thus more humanly ‘abnormal’ in this same respect), in contexts where each choice is likely to entail some unrecognized costs and/or benefits.”<sup>43</sup> They equate ‘normal’ with irrationality or bias because they are speaking particularly of religious beliefs, which they regard as irrational in evidential terms. But if we focus specifically on the cognitive capacities that are the actual subject of the research, the capacities through which religion arises or registers, the matter is somewhat different. In regard to these faculties themselves, the “dilemma” would be much more straightforward: whether to be humanly normal (in full possession of these faculties) or be humanly abnormal (lacking these faculties in some measure). To be lacking in emotion and/or the religion-susceptible cognitive faculties would be to be unable to function effectively or rationally in much of human life.

The cognitive components of a healthy mind, which constitute the distinctive human intelligence with its aptitude for living in social groups of conscious beings, are the same ones that are “religion forming” in the sense of producing first order religious beliefs. Unless scientific thinking is to be carried out by other kinds of minds, to be effectively rational is to be religion-susceptible.<sup>44</sup> Rational thinking itself makes use of these same components to some extent, as is the case with regard to emotion. For people with brains like ours, it is hard to see how we could arrive at dramatically counterintuitive pictures of the world *apart* from entanglement with cognitive capacities like agency attribution, pattern recognition and theory of mind. Surely considerations like this are relevant to Hume’s dilemma and what TMM call our “epistemological duty.”

In his book, *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not*, Robert N. McCauley picks up our topic at exactly this point.<sup>45</sup> There is, he says, no “religion department” in our brains, but instead there is a suite of cognitive dispositions which together almost inevitably give rise to first order religious beliefs, though they each have other key functions as well. We will limit ourselves to two that TMM discuss: theory of mind and

---

<sup>43</sup> Thornhill-Miller and Millican, “The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma ...”, 40.

<sup>44</sup> Here the areas of machine intelligence and artificial intelligence are relevant. Is it possible to “outsource” fully rational thinking to entities that operate without some of these cognitive processes, or can artificial intelligence itself be built or learned only with some approximation of these same faculties?

<sup>45</sup> Robert N. McCauley, *Why Religion Is Natural and Science Is Not* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

agency detection. McCauley says it is important from the beginning to distinguish different types of cognitive behavior. Two of these are what he calls “maturationally natural” for human beings. We automatically become adept at them, like speaking a language, rather than adept through training, like riding a bike. The first, which we might call common sense/nature, equips us with a naïve physics of the non-sentient world, immediate intuitions about gravity and the behavior of bodies, for instance. The second, common sense/social, equips us with similar rapid cognitive processes for life in a world of other sentient beings, including faculties such as theory of mind and agent detection.<sup>46</sup>

These faculties put our perceptions and attention in rapport with the way the world actually works to an extent that individual learning could not. In many respects they are simply highly condensed means to lead us to mental or behavioral conclusions that could equally but ineffectually be produced through laborious secondary reflection, given enough time and the accumulation of cultural background knowledge. Regarding this aspect of these cognitive faculties, we may say that the “dilemma” is in fact the simple one of being normally human and normally rational or being humanly abnormal and subrational.

However, these faculties do have innate bias, as simple optical illusions witness in the field of common sense/nature and non-existent “things that go bump in the night” witness in the field of common sense/social. Cognitive faculties like theory of mind and agency detection incline us to err on the side of false positives, and make the acceptance of invisible, intentional agents an inviting rather than a thorny path. Both in the areas of common sense and popular religion, our cognitive faculties inevitably carry us into convictions upon which reason cannot pronounce or which are found contrary to reflective reason. In these cases – which of course are not functionally or sensibly distinct to the minds involved – the dilemma looks more as TMM state it, a choice between normal but possibly irrational function and abnormal but perhaps more rational function, each with attendant practical costs and benefits.

To these two types of maturationally natural cognitive processing, McCauley adds two other comparatively unnatural ones, theology and science, which he calls “reflective” modes of cognitive processing.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, 231 ff. The development of maturationally natural systems is discussed in Chapter Two.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*

Natural modes of cognitive processing arise without conscious effort, are easily triggered, operate with great speed and efficiency, and yield results we easily assimilate. Reflective ones, while they may in unusual cases become so well established in some individuals as to seem almost intuitive for them, are laboriously acquired, require support, operate more slowly and deliberately, and often yield counterintuitive results. They are in these respects humanly abnormal. These are rational in ways better suited to uncover truths in the counterintuitive phase space outside that covered by our natural cognitive modes of processing, which are rational in ways better suited to uncover truth in the intuitive middle world of ordinary life. McCauley concludes that first order supernaturalism is most strongly grounded in our cognitive structures, while theology (second order religion) is a much weaker and counterintuitive enterprise. The same relationship obtains between the fragile intellectual endeavor of science and its more cognitively robust partner common sense.

What McCauley's picture brings home to us is the fact that just as there is no religion department in the brain, there is no reason or science department. Like religion, these two use a suite of varied cognitive processing modes, including ones that religion also uses. Many argue that religion is not the primary "target" of any of these processing modes. McCauley reminds us that as an empirical matter, nothing could be further from a "target" of any of the modes than science.<sup>48</sup> The extraordinary achievements of science stem from its ability to selectively, strategically resist and circumvent these natural cognitive inclinations.<sup>49</sup>

McCauley's analysis suggests a strong asymmetry. No naturalist can dispense with the operative rationality in the cognitive modes relating to theory of mind and agent detection, not in their personal mental development for life in human society, not in a career within science as a social enterprise, nor in many branches of explicit scientific practice itself (archaeology, the search for extra-terrestrial life, psychology).<sup>50</sup> But people can, and do, readily dispense with second order reflection,

---

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, 102.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, 116.

<sup>50</sup> We could view many arguments from advocates of intelligent design as failing as evidential arguments, but successfully illustrating this point. It is not that one can prove there is an intentional agent behind particular phenomena, so much as it is that scientific inquiry presumes an as yet undiscovered intelligibility. While numberless facts may lie in the natural world unknown to any human being, the only residence we can imagine for an existing but still invisible intelligibility of those facts is other minds. We cannot

whether theology or science. In fact, McCauley stresses, scientists require care to avoid falling “back” into terminology or behavior shaped by these natural cognitive modes of processing. And in fact, when not fully “on the job” they frequently do exactly that, as theologians fall from theological correctness into the language of first order beliefs.<sup>51</sup> This observation does not minimize the special power of such hard-won scientific reflection and its critical edge in regard to religion. It is meant to be clear about what we can expect from each of these types of mental engagement.

McCauley’s reading of empirical research suggests that the benefits of religion which figure so centrally in TMM’s argument attach directly to the cognitively robust first order beliefs, and not to the much weaker, personally episodic secondary reflection they would like to see supersede them. Their proposal to “rationally remove all the overlapping fingers [pointing at the moon] associated with our different religions” would remove all the first order beliefs, and so also the benefits that were the premise for their particular approach to the discussion of religion.<sup>52</sup> This conclusion seems to follow from the very type of empirical research to which they appeal, suggesting a naturalist program to harvest religious benefits will need to give more attention to “harnessing” the types of beliefs associated with those benefits, rather than abolishing them.

Religion is an extremely complex phenomenon, a fact we can now correlate with the spectrum of different cognitive processes implicated in it. The level of sophistication needed in a thesis like TMM’s can be suggested if we look at the complexity in a comparable but simpler issue, that of the placebo effect. Recent research in this area indicates that it is possible in some conditions to benefit from the knowing administration of a placebo.<sup>53</sup> For instance, in one experiment patients, using a blister pack of pills they know to be a random selection of placebos and drug doses, received equal benefit from both. In a yet more fascinating experiment, patients treated with a pain-killing drug and then moved

---

successfully investigate such intelligibility without activating cognitive equipment that can implicate those attributions.

<sup>51</sup> TMM briefly note research to this effect, Thornhill-Miller and Millican, “The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma...”, 31, note 79. For more extensive review of such research, see McCauley, *Why Religion Is Natural and Science Is Not*, 128-33.

<sup>52</sup> Thornhill-Miller and Millican, “The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma ...”, 49.

<sup>53</sup> Information in this paragraph is taken from Jo Marchant, “Placebos: Honest Fakery,” *Nature* 535, no. 7611 (2016).

to a placebo experienced pain relief mediated through the particular physiological pathways activated by the prior drug. One consistent element I see in this research is that the placebo effect depends upon the first order belief that one is being treated with an effective agent. Once that belief is elicited, it can to some extent be rationally manipulated at a second order level. But success in that respect requires priming by and contact with that first order belief. If the criticisms I have raised in this article are sound, then discussion of the connection of religion and religion's benefits to first order beliefs needs to proceed with a similar sensitivity to that integral relation.

I have focused on the particular, first order, contrasting religious beliefs that TMM wish to abandon. I have argued (with Salamon) that some such beliefs can be rationally grounded "from above" on axiological grounds. I have argued that on the basis of cognitive research these supernaturalist beliefs are the most robust form of religion that arises "from below" in our mental process and so are integral to any benefits from religion that are to be rationally assessed. I have also argued that the diversity in concrete religious experience does not devalue soteriological testimony supporting multiple religious fulfillments. All of these points run counter to TMM's thesis as currently stated. My discussion of the specific example of the placebo effect suggests that TMM could strengthen their thesis with greater attention to the empirically objective importance of first order beliefs.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Damasio, Antonio R. *Descartes' Error : Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. New York: G.P. Putnam, 1994.
- Heim, S. Mark. *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*. Faith Meets Faith. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995.
- Hick, John. *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989.
- Inzlicht, Michael, Alexa M. Tullett, and Marie Good. "The Need to Believe: A Neuroscience Account of Religion as a Motivated Process." *Religion, Brain and Behavior* 1, no. 3 (October 1, 2011): 192-212.
- Lama, Dalai. "The Bodhgaya Interviews." In *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes*, edited by Paul J. Griffiths. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990.
- Marchant, Jo. "Placebos: Honest Fakery." *Nature* 535, no. 7611 (2016/07/14/2016): S14-S15.

- McCauley, Robert N. *Why Religion Is Natural and Science Is Not*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Salamon, Janusz. "Atheism and Agatheism in the Global Ethical Discourse: Reply to Millican and Thornhill-Miller". *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 7, no. 4 (2015), 197-245.
- Thornhill-Miller, Branden, and Peter Millican. "The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma, Revisions of Humean Thought, New Empirical Research, and the Limits of Rational Religious Belief." *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 7, no. 1 (2015), 1-49.
- Wildman, Wesley. "The Significance of the Evolution of Religious Belief and Behavior for Religious Studies and Theology". Chap. 11 In *Where God and Science Meet* edited by Patrick McNamara, 227-72: Praeger, 2006.