

## **What (if anything) should Christian theology learn from the cognitive science of religion?**

Neil Messer\*

*Department of Philosophy, Religions and liberal Arts, University of Winchester, Winchester, UK.*

\*Corresponding author: [Neil.Messer@winchester.ac.uk](mailto:Neil.Messer@winchester.ac.uk)

ORCID: 0000-0001-8479-9419

Word count: 8,115 words (including title page).

Funding details: Some of the early research contributing to this article was supported by a grant from Templeton World Charity Foundation, Inc. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Templeton World Charity Foundation, Inc.

Disclosure statement: The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Notes on contributor: Neil Messer is Professor of Theology at the University of Winchester. His publications include *Theological Neuroethics: Christian Ethics Meets the Science of the Human Brain* (London: T & T Clark, 2017) and *Science in Theology: Encounters between Science and the Christian Tradition* (London: T & T Clark, 2020).

## **What (if anything) should Christian theology learn from the cognitive science of religion?**

This article asks what, if anything, Christian theology should learn from the cognitive science of religion (CSR). Two possible answers are explored. The first is that Christian theology has nothing to learn from CSR. This is rejected in favour of the second: theology can learn from CSR by appropriating CSR insights carefully and critically to a theological understanding formed first and foremost by Scripture. Karl Barth's theological critique of religion and his engagement with Ludwig Feuerbach are used as a model for this approach. The article concludes with specific proposals about how, and how not, to engage theologically with CSR.

Keywords: Barrett, Justin; Barth, Karl; Christian theology; cognitive science of religion; Feuerbach, Ludwig; Harrison, Peter.

### **Introduction: stating the problem**

The cognitive science of religion (CSR) is a relatively young field of research, which uses the tools and approaches of cognitive science to investigate religious beliefs, practices and experiences in terms of the working of the human mind.<sup>1</sup> Justin Barrett, one of its founders, has listed four basic tenets of CSR.<sup>2</sup> First, human minds are not blank slates, but have various “cognitive biases and predilections”<sup>3</sup> which predispose them to work in one way rather than another. Second, some cognitive systems or “mental tools” are “largely invariant across cultures.”<sup>4</sup> Third, these trans-cultural cognitive biases and mental tools, as Barrett puts it, “inform and constrain religious thought, experience, and expression.”<sup>5</sup> This is not to deny, of course, that actual religious beliefs, practices, and experiences are also shaped in many ways by cultural particulars. Fourth, cognitive scientists of religion are typically interested in religious ideas and practices shared by a community, population, or wider sample of humanity, not those that are individual and idiosyncratic. While some authors refer to a “standard

model,”<sup>6</sup> Barrett emphasises that CSR is diverse, methodologically pluralistic and has few if any non-negotiable commitments beyond the basic tenets.<sup>7</sup>

CSR investigates many aspects of belief, practice and experience,<sup>8</sup> but one of the things for which it is best known is attempting to explain why belief in “supernatural agents” – such as gods, spirits, ghosts, angels and demons – is so common in human beings.<sup>9</sup> CSR scholars identify various cognitive systems said to play a part in this. One is a “hypersensitive agency detection device” (HADD): a cognitive system that predisposes us to attribute events in the world to the actions of other agents rather than the interactions of merely physical objects. Another is a “theory of mind,” which leads us to attribute mental processes and an inner life rather like ours to other agents. A third is a tendency to retain “minimally counterintuitive” concepts more strongly than those that are completely intuitive *or* highly counterintuitive: so (for example) the concept of an agent who is invisible and all-knowing, but somewhat like us in most other respects, will make a particularly strong impression on our minds. CSR scholars propose that the interaction of mental systems such as these means that human minds readily generate, respond to, and retain concepts of supernatural agents.<sup>10</sup>

Although the two are not identical, CSR has close links to the evolutionary study of religion: if CSR identifies cognitive systems that play a part in religious belief and experience, it is natural to ask about the origins of those cognitive systems. So-called “by-product” theories are popular among CSR scholars: the idea of these is that religion itself was not directly selected during our evolutionary history; instead, it arises from the interaction of cognitive systems such as the HADD and theory of mind, which were adaptive for our evolutionary ancestors.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, “adaptationist” theories argue that religion itself was adaptive for our ancestors: for example, David Sloan Wilson’s group-selectionist theory posits that religion arose as an adaptation for reinforcing group

co-operation.<sup>12</sup> Some authors suggest that evolutionary explanations of religion can combine both by-product and adaptationist elements.<sup>13</sup>

The question addressed in the present essay is: What (if anything) should Christian theology learn from CSR? This question needs a little unpacking. Christian theology can be understood in many ways, but one widely used definition, associated with the mediaeval theologian Anselm of Canterbury, is “faith seeking understanding.”<sup>14</sup> Christian communities, for all their variety and diversity, hold particular beliefs, engage in distinctive practices, and share characteristic experiences of faith, which they take to be in some sense a response to God’s self-disclosure and self-giving in the person of Jesus Christ. On this account, theology’s business is to reflect on those beliefs, practices, and experiences, in order to articulate as clearly, rigorously, and coherently as possible the faith of the Christian community and its implications for Christian living. Now the beliefs, practices, and experiences on which Christian theologians reflect *appear* to be among those studied and theorised by cognitive scientists of religion in terms of human “cognitive biases and predilections.” Our question then becomes: In their task of reflecting on the faith and practice of the Church, what help (if any) should theologians expect to receive from the accounts and explanations of Christian faith and practice offered by CSR?

Notice the form of that question. It is not a question about how “science” relates to “theology,” as though they were two separate entities which might (for example) be in conflict, or independent of one another, or in dialogue, or integrated together. For a long time that question was the standard one addressed by scholars like Ian Barbour, whose typology of science and religion I have just alluded to.<sup>15</sup> However, for reasons explained elsewhere,<sup>16</sup> this article addresses a different kind of question, which is really about the sources of Christian theology: What contribution (if any) should CSR make to

a Christian understanding of ourselves in relation to God, alongside more familiar sources of theology like Scripture and Christian tradition?

The following discussion explores two possible answers to that question: first, that CSR has no contribution to make to theological understanding; second, that it does have a contribution to make, but its findings and insights must be *critically* appropriated into a theological understanding shaped first and foremost by the Scriptures and the Christian tradition's reflection thereon. These are not the only possible answers, of course,<sup>17</sup> but these two are sufficiently interesting to be worthy of further exploration.

### **First answer: CSR has no contribution to make to Christian theological understanding**

Should we say that CSR has no contribution to make to Christian theological understanding? One possible reason for saying this would be that CSR was considered more or less *irrelevant* to Christian theology: that the beliefs and practices it seeks to explain do not correspond to authentic Christian experience, and the theories it constructs do not represent the authentic Christian faith on which Christian theology reflects. The theologian Markus Mühling seems to be suggesting something like this when he claims that

Approaches to religious experience associated with the natural sciences such as CSR ... that focus on individual, extraordinary experiences do not actually deal with the same subject matter as theological epistemology, but rather with something that would have to be seen as superstition from a theological perspective.<sup>18</sup>

His complaint is that “CSR assumes that *religious* experiences are special or extraordinary kinds of experiences.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, CSR identifies a particular subset of human experiences as “religious” (such as the experience of “supernatural agents,”

perhaps) and separates these off from everyday experiences that are not considered religious. The “religious” forms of experience are then given cognitive-scientific explanations as products of cognitive systems such as the HADD. But according to Mühling, this way of “defining from the very outset what is ‘religious’ and what is not”<sup>20</sup> revives a separation between sacred and secular that the Protestant Reformers rejected. Christian experience, he insists, refers not (or not only) to the extraordinary and supernatural, but to ordinary, everyday experiences:

Saying grace at the table, giving an evening prayer, talking with a fellow Christian about her everyday problems, participating attentively or inattentively in a service, performing mystical prayer or meditation, are all acts and experiences expressing exactly the same religious value – if there is indeed something like religious “value” at all!<sup>21</sup>

It might not be difficult for a cognitive scientist of religion to respond to this critique by pointing to CSR studies that *have* investigated the ordinary, everyday practices of believers and communities.<sup>22</sup> However, Mühling seems to be claiming that there is something fundamentally problematic about moves that CSR cannot avoid making: identifying certain kinds of activity or experience as “religious,” separating them out from those not considered religious, and making them the objects of particular study using cognitive scientific approaches. His objection is not to empirical studies as such, nor to the fact that these studies may generate criticisms of religion, which he welcomes as “a very fruitful endeavour and ... a vivid and necessary part of theology itself.”<sup>23</sup> The problem he poses is rather that in defining *a priori* what does and does not count as “religious,” and separating “religious” from ordinary experiences, CSR defines “religion” in a way that at best gives a very distorted image of Christian faith and life.

Mühling’s worry might find support from a very different quarter in the historical analysis of Peter Harrison. In his book *The Territories of Science and*

*Religion*, Harrison argues that the very idea of a “science of religion” is only possible thanks to “a remarkable change in the understanding of both religion and science that can be traced back to the early modern period.”<sup>24</sup> In the ancient and mediaeval world, he argues, *scientia* and *religio* both referred primarily to inner dispositions or virtues, both of which were directed towards fulfilling the ends (*telē*) of human beings. For Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, *religio* was a moral virtue related to justice, concerned with giving God the worship that was God’s due.<sup>25</sup> Of course it had an outward aspect in actions such as offerings, tithes and vows, but these were secondary to the inward aspect of devotion and prayer.<sup>26</sup> According to Harrison, the modern concept of “religions” (in the plural), as distinct systems of propositional beliefs and practices, did not exist in premodern understanding.<sup>27</sup>

Following Aristotle, Aquinas regarded *scientia* as one of the intellectual virtues, directed to the fulfilment of our natural inclination to seek knowledge.<sup>28</sup> As an intellectual virtue, *scientia* was concerned with deriving truths from first principles. It could also refer to a systematic body of knowledge derived in this way, and Aquinas and other mediaeval thinkers distinguished a number of different *scientiae*.<sup>29</sup> But again, the emphasis here is on *scientia* as an *inner* quality or habit of mind that made one “adept at drawing ‘scientific’ conclusions from general premises.”<sup>30</sup>

If “science” and “religion” were understood in this way, as inner qualities or dispositions, then it would make little more sense to speak of a “science of religion” than (for example) a “courage of justice.” However, according to Harrison, a dramatic shift in the understanding of these concepts began in the early modern period following the Reformation.<sup>31</sup> He identifies various influences that helped bring this about. One was the Reformers’ rejection of mediaeval scholasticism with its Aristotelian roots. Related to this was a growing scepticism that human minds were naturally inclined

towards knowledge and truth (as Aristotle and Aquinas believed), since the Reformers emphasised the corrupting effect of sin on the human intellect. If human minds were clouded by the Fall, then true knowledge and understanding of nature would not come *naturally* to them. They would have to be gained by means of investigation and experiment, which according to early modern advocates of science like Francis Bacon were able to partially reverse the effects of the Fall.<sup>32</sup>

Turning to religion, Harrison identifies one important influence as the Reformers' doctrine of grace. This made Protestants suspicious of the idea that humans by their own efforts could develop the ability to worship God rightly: that idea smacked too much of salvation by works and the belief that humans have the capacity to make ourselves good. Along with this suspicion came a growing emphasis on knowledge and understanding of the faith, which fostered a growth in the use of educational tools such as catechisms to instruct believers in the propositions of their faith. A person's knowledge of, and assent to, the doctrines of their faith came increasingly to be seen as outward signs of their inner faith and devotion.

As Harrison emphasises, this did not mean inner faith and piety were ignored, or their importance for "true religion" denied. It is simply that it became possible to distinguish between the inward and outward expressions of "religion" – and, increasingly, to define "religion" by its outwardly observable beliefs and practices. This in turn made it possible to distinguish between different "religions" (in the plural) with different beliefs and practices. In short, the process Harrison attributes to the early modern period is a *reification* of both science and religion. Concepts which had referred primarily to inner qualities or habits of mind were gradually turned into things: bodies of propositional knowledge and sets of distinctive social practices. Science came to be understood as a distinctive kind of social practice that aims to understand natural



phenomena by means of investigation and experiment, and religion as an observable phenomenon defined by the beliefs people profess and the practices they engage in. It then became thinkable that science could use its methods to investigate and explain the human phenomenon known as religion.

Harrison's historical analysis, particularly his claim that the reification of "religion" is a peculiarly modern development, has not gone unchallenged.<sup>33</sup> However, if it is correct, it might lend support to the concern suggested by Mühling: that the account of "religion" generated by the methods and approaches of CSR may prove so different from Christian self-understanding that CSR gives at best a highly distorted picture of Christian faith, and therefore contributes little or nothing to Christian theology conceived as "faith seeking understanding." Harrison's historical analysis offers two reasons why someone might entertain that thought.<sup>34</sup>

First, if he is right, Christian self-understanding was largely formed in contexts in which the modern concept of "religion" was unknown: it is not found in the New Testament, nor in the writings of many of the most formative thinkers for the Western Christian tradition, such as Augustine and Aquinas. Even the Reformers, who helped set in train the shifts of understanding which gave rise to the modern idea of "religion," did not have this notion fully formed: when Calvin writes about "true religion" he means something more like the older sense of piety and devotion.<sup>35</sup> So if CSR scholars treat Christianity as "a religion" in this modern sense and seek to understand and explain it as such, perhaps the accounts they come up with will be so far removed from the self-understanding of Christian believers and communities, formed by that historical tradition, that they will have little to offer to theologians whose business is to reflect rigorously and critically on Christian self-understanding and practice.

Second – and in a way this connects to Mühling’s critique – Harrison argues that the scientific study of religion only becomes possible once a “religion” can be understood largely or entirely as a system of outward beliefs and practices, because these are empirically observable in a way that the inner qualities and dispositions are not.<sup>36</sup> He makes this point with reference to David Sloan Wilson, who uses catechisms as his primary data for constructing his evolutionary theory of religion precisely because they are “measurable aspects of the world.”<sup>37</sup> But this raises the possibility that if you define religion in terms of what you can observe and measure, you write out of the script some of the aspects that are most central and identity-giving to that faith tradition itself. Now cognitive scientists of religion, unlike Wilson, certainly do seek to study inward attitudes, experiences and dispositions. But perhaps a critic informed by Mühling and Harrison would press the question whether, in operationalising these elusive aspects of inner life in order to measure and study them, CSR risks oversimplifying and distorting them.

My reading of Harrison and Mühling, then, raises the question whether a CSR account of “Christian religion” will be so distant from the self-understanding of Christian believers and communities that it has little to offer a Christian theology whose business is to reflect on that self-understanding. If theologians allow their thinking to be shaped by CSR, is the result more likely to be distortion or confusion than illumination? If so, Christian theologians have of course no grounds to deny the validity of CSR as a research field in its own right, but should leave it well alone as a dialogue partner for their theological work.

**Second answer: theology must *carefully and critically* appropriate CSR claims**

In the end, I do not think Christian theologians are committed to the first answer I have just outlined: I believe theology can benefit from an engagement with CSR. However, the concerns raised in the previous section, drawing on Mühling and Harrison, suggest that in engaging with CSR, theologians should handle its findings, theories, and claims carefully, critically, and in quite particular ways. My reasons for favouring careful critical engagement over non-engagement are as follows.

First, I must acknowledge that some of the critical remarks about CSR that I have extrapolated from Mühling's and Harrison's analyses could be challenged to a greater or lesser extent by cognitive scientists of religion. A CSR scholar could respond, for example, that CSR is not wedded to any particular definition of what counts as religious, that it is interested in everyday and communal expressions of religion as well as extraordinary individual experiences, and that it can and does study inner attitudes, dispositions and experiences as well as outwardly observable features of "religion."<sup>38</sup> Barrett has even raised the question whether CSR would get along better without using the contested category of "religion" at all, which might suggest that CSR does not depend on the reification of religion for its viability as a research field in the way suggested in the last section.<sup>39</sup> Such responses would certainly qualify the claim made in the first answer about the distance between CSR and Christian theology.

But mainly I wish to pursue another line of thought: the history narrated by Harrison is to a large extent a *Christian* history. The key shifts of understanding in the early modern period that made a "science of religion" possible were the work of Christian scholars – theologians, philosophers and others. What Harrison is suggesting (and he is not alone in this)<sup>40</sup> is that some of the moves these Christian thinkers made turned out to have far-reaching consequences. What they did with the best of intentions

stored up trouble for their successors. If this is so, it motivates critical engagement rather than non-engagement by Christian theologians. If it is in part a Christian history (even if misguided in some respects) that has generated CSR, Christian theologians cannot simply write off the latter as alien to their work. At the very least, if CSR does embody aspects of distorted understanding for which previous generations of theologians are partly responsible, their successors today have some responsibility for unpicking those distortions. But more positively, it suggests that what CSR investigates should be more or less recognisable by Christian theologians, in which case they cannot ignore CSR and might have things to learn from it.

The great twentieth century Protestant theologian Karl Barth would probably have concurred that influential figures in the history of modern theology stored up trouble for their successors – even if his opinion about *what* stored up the trouble and what forms it took differed from Harrison's. Barth's uncompromising theological critique of religion, not to say his apparent unwillingness to engage theologically with the natural sciences, might make him seem an unpromising dialogue partner for the conversation I am attempting to set up. However, the remainder of this article will argue that Barth's engagement with the nineteenth century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, and Barth's broader critique of religion, offer helpful pointers for theologians wanting to engage carefully and critically with CSR. This is not a matter of following Barth uncritically, but thinking with him and perhaps beyond him. I begin with Barth's engagement with Feuerbach.

### ***Barth on Feuerbach***

While Feuerbach's account of religion changed and developed over time,<sup>41</sup> he is perhaps best known for the central idea of his 1841 work *The Essence of Christianity*, his so-called reduction of theology to anthropology. By this is meant that, in Todd

Gooch's words, "the predicates that religious believers apply to God are predicates that properly apply to the human species-essence of which God is an imaginary representation."<sup>42</sup> The Christian God is simply an infinite projection of human experiences, aspirations and desires, or as Feuerbach put it: "The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or, rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective — *i.e.*, contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being."<sup>43</sup> Claims that purport to be about God are, properly understood, about human nature, and what believers take to be a relation to God is in fact "an alienated form of human self-consciousness."<sup>44</sup>

Barth engages with this Feuerbachian critique at various points in his career for different purposes,<sup>45</sup> but our present focus is on his response to it in some of his early writings.<sup>46</sup> While certainly critical of Feuerbach, Barth in these essays pays him considerable respect, remarking that he "showed himself to possess a theological knowledge which sets him far above the majority of modern philosophers,"<sup>47</sup> and even that "the position of Feuerbach the anti-theologian was more theological than that of many theologians."<sup>48</sup> Barth considers Feuerbach's critique of theology salutary, not only for the theologians of Feuerbach's day, but for Barth's own contemporaries. Feuerbach, he argues, exposed a fundamental weakness of liberal Protestant theology since Friedrich Schleiermacher: in seeking to defend its claims and doctrines against the challenges of Enlightenment philosophy by taking religious experience as its starting point, theology laid itself open to the Feuerbachian critique that God is only a projection of human experience and supposedly theological claims are really statements about anthropology.

Theology had let itself be driven by the upsurge of a self-glorifying and self-satisfied humanism from Pietism over the Enlightenment to Romanticism. It had

been forced into an apologetic corner where it had ever lessening power of defence. In that embarrassing position Feuerbach's question was unavoidable.<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, Barth argues, Feuerbach's critique not only applies to the Protestant theology of his own and Barth's times, but also exposes a more long-standing problem with German Protestant theology: aspects of Luther's own thought and expression, such his doctrines of faith, the incarnation and the Lord's Supper, laid Lutheran theology open to Feuerbach's critique.<sup>50</sup> In this respect, as I suggested earlier, Barth could have concurred with Harrison's more recent argument that some of the key moves made by early modern Christian thinkers stored up trouble for their successors, even if the two would identify different moves as the ones that caused the trouble.

For Barth, the only secure defence of theology against the Feuerbachian critique is to base it from first to last on God's gracious self-revelation to humanity:

We now see what we do if we take in our hand the only weapon which can touch Feuerbach. We cannot strike him without ourselves being struck by it ... It is only a base where one can stand and with fear and trembling let it speak for itself. There is a test of whether or not we stand on this base ... That test is the recognition that *we* are and remain liars in relation to God, but that we can lay claim to God's truth, his certainty and his salvation as grace – and *only* as grace.<sup>51</sup>

### ***Barth's theological critique of religion***

Barth's engagement with Feuerbach also supports his theological critique of religion, to which I referred earlier.<sup>52</sup> In essence, his critique is that religion represents a human effort to know God and justify ourselves before God. This amounts to "unbelief" or "faithlessness" (*Unglaube*): a refusal to receive revelation and saving grace as God's gifts. Human religiosity is a failure to acknowledge that we can only know God insofar as God reveals Godself to us in Jesus Christ, and we can only be justified and saved through Christ's life, death, and resurrection. As a refusal of God's grace, religion

stands under divine judgement. Many of Barth's readers have seen this, understandably enough, as the worst kind of Christian exclusivism and triumphalism towards other faiths.<sup>53</sup> It might also seem to discourage theologians from taking an interest in the scientific study of religion. But these judgements would be simplistic and one-sided, failing to do justice to the nuanced and dialectical character of Barth's account.

In giving a more complete picture, the first thing to notice is that Barth is not directly addressing twenty-first century questions about how Christians should relate to people of other faiths – or, for that matter, what theologians should make of CSR. His main concern is, in Joshua Ralston's words, "religion as a category in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theology and philosophy."<sup>54</sup> In other words, his focus is more on the kind of historical development in the concept of religion mapped by Harrison, and the questions and challenges put by critics like Feuerbach, than on the agenda of the twenty-first century theology of religions, or indeed CSR. Consistently with this focus, Barth is explicit that his critique is directed first and foremost at *Christianity* as a religion. Christianity is a religion engaged in human efforts to know God and justify ourselves before God, and as such it comes under the judgement of God's Word.

However, this is only one side of Barth's account. He also thinks that Christianity is "the true religion"<sup>55</sup> – but this is emphatically not because of any inherent superiority over other religions. It is only by God's grace: God elects Christianity to be a means of divine revelation. What Barth articulates is a nuanced and dialectical view of Christianity as *simul justus et peccator* (so to say): *at one and the same time* a religion that stands under divine judgement and, through grace, a means by which God is made known to humanity. Ralston and others suggest that it is possible, using Barth's approach, to go beyond Barth in taking seriously the possibility of divine revelation in other religious traditions, though that is not the main focus of the present discussion.<sup>56</sup>

### ***Lessons for theological engagement with CSR***

The claim I wish to make is that Barth's theological critique of religion and his engagement with Feuerbach can, first, alert us to ways of trying to engage theologically with CSR that are better avoided, and second, indicate more promising and fruitful directions for such engagement.

#### *Ways better avoided: CSR-based apologetics and "universal natural theology"*

In his book *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology*, Justin Barrett proposes that CSR can support what he calls a "universal natural theology": a defence of religious belief based only on reason and evidence from the natural world, without appealing to special divine revelation.<sup>57</sup> His argument can be outlined as follows.

Premise 1: Our natural cognitive processes generate natural religious beliefs.

Premise 2: We are entitled to assume that our natural cognitive processes are generally reliable, in the absence of particular reasons to think they are not.<sup>58</sup>

Conclusion: Therefore, we are entitled to regard natural religious beliefs as justified until we are given reasons to be suspicious of them.

Barrett's argument faces sceptical challenges from psychologists and philosophers who argue that CSR shows the cognitive processes generating natural religious beliefs to be epistemically unreliable.<sup>59</sup> He intends Premise 2 to answer the challenge by shifting the burden of proof onto the sceptics,<sup>60</sup> and in a subsequent article he and Ian Church expand on this attempt to turn the tables on the sceptics by arguing that CSR offers less epistemic comfort to atheists than theists.<sup>61</sup> Barrett and Church essentially present atheists with a dilemma: *either* (1) show that the belief-forming faculties studied by CSR (CSR-BFFs) are unreliable with respect to religious beliefs but not the "mundane beliefs" they were naturally selected to generate,<sup>62</sup> *or* (2) accept that CSR-BFFs are



generally epistemically unreliable. However, both horns of this dilemma involve questionable arguments.

Barrett and Church suggest that (1) cannot be done, because religious beliefs have been formed in the same “cognitive environment” as mundane beliefs, and there does not appear to be any way to show that CSR-BFFs are reliable with respect to the latter but not the former without special pleading or begging the question.<sup>63</sup> However, the cognitive environment in which mundane and religious beliefs are formed is not the only possible site of difference between them. They also differ in their referents: mundane beliefs refer to the natural world, religious beliefs (in this account) to the supernatural. CSR-BFFs might have been selected to be generally reliable with respect to mundane beliefs,<sup>64</sup> but *ex hypothesi* (since we are considering by-product theories) there can be no such natural selection pressure constraining their reliability with respect to religious beliefs. So it seems possible to claim that CSR-BFFs are reliable with respect to mundane but not religious beliefs, without special pleading or question-begging.<sup>65</sup>

As for (2), Barrett and Church attempt a *reductio* whereby demonstrating the unreliability of CSR-BFFs would also undermine atheists’ own beliefs about the world.<sup>66</sup> However, this assumes that the kinds of cognitive processes by which CSR-BFFs generate beliefs are the same as (or relevantly similar to) those involved in philosophical arguments about the merits of theism and atheism. This is not necessarily the case; it is possible, for example, that the former are quick-and-dirty mental heuristics while the latter are a slower and more rationally rigorous form of cognitive processing, akin to the fast and slow modes in Joshua Greene’s dual-process model of moral cognition.<sup>67</sup> My point here is not to advocate Greene’s model, and certainly not to suggest that atheism is more rational than religious belief, but simply to point out that it

would require further evidence or argument to show that atheists who question the epistemic reliability of CSR-BFFs thereby cast doubt on the reliability of their own reasoning. More generally, my purpose in challenging Barrett's CSR-based universal natural theology is not of course to advocate atheism, but – in the spirit of Barth's engagement with Feuerbach – to identify insecure grounds for belief, which theology would do well to avoid.

Barth's engagement with Feuerbach suggests a further reason to be wary of CSR-based universal natural theologies. What is the relationship between the god-concepts generated by CSR-BFFs and the God-talk of Christian theologians? Barrett thinks of it as essentially continuous and developmental: CSR-BFFs generate only vague and incomplete beliefs, which are further developed and specified by particular cultural influences including the work of theologians.<sup>68</sup> However, it will not have escaped the reader's notice that the god-concepts said to be generated by natural religion in this CSR-based account look very much like the kind of projection that Feuerbach described. A Christian theologian informed by Barth's use of the Feuerbachian critique might well conclude that the relation between CSR god-concepts and the God of Christian revelation is one of discontinuity, not continuity: that a theology which takes CSR god-concepts as its starting point will (to paraphrase a well-known Barthian soundbite) end up not speaking of God, but only speaking of humanity in a loud voice.<sup>69</sup>

None of this means, however, that the phenomenon of natural religion, as described and theorised by CSR, is theologically irrelevant. Recall how Barth argues that religion, in the form of Christianity, can be taken up by God's grace and used as a means of God's revelation. Pressing this thought further than Barth did, in somewhat similar vein to Joshua Ralston: if our faith in God rests on other foundations, we might

have reason to think that the natural phenomenon of religion could *by God's grace* be taken up and used as a means of God's self-disclosure to humanity. In other words, a CSR account of religion could fit well with what Barrett, drawing on Alister McGrath, calls a "confessional natural theology":<sup>70</sup> an engagement with scientific findings as part of an exercise in faith seeking understanding.

#### *More promising forms of theological engagement with CSR*

If religion is understood theologically in this dialectical way – as a faithless exercise in self-justification before God, but *at the same time*, by God's grace, a possible means of revelation – this should motivate theological interest in the study of it, including CSR.

In closing, I briefly outline three examples of how this might work. It is worth emphasising that while I have been rather critical of Barrett's CSR-based universal natural theology, these suggestions are strongly informed by other proposals of his.<sup>71</sup>

First, Barrett draws attention to the Calvinist idea of the *sensus divinitatis*: a natural knowledge of God or "seed of religion" implanted in the human mind by our Creator.<sup>72</sup> He suggests that CSR can support this idea of a *sensus divinitatis* and enable us to understand it more fully.<sup>73</sup> Now Calvin was hardly optimistic about what this "seed of religion" can do for us. Because of human sin, he thought, "scarcely one in a hundred is found who cherishes it in his heart, and not one in whom it grows to maturity."<sup>74</sup> Four centuries later, Barth cited this negative judgement in support of his own critique of religion.<sup>75</sup> But even in this limited and negative way, a theological anthropology – a Christian account of what it is to be human – should include an account of human being as religious being. In the spirit of "faith seeking understanding," CSR might help theologians understand more fully what this looks like.

Second, another famously gloomy remark from Calvin: "the human mind is ... a perpetual forge of idols."<sup>76</sup> Of course, when the Christian tradition refers to "idols," it

frequently means not images made of wood or stone, but the distorted images of God that we construct in our minds and our God-talk; so this remark of Calvin's can be read as a comment on how readily human minds construct false and distorted images of God. And again, Christians would do well to read it first and foremost as a critical reflection on the distortions to which *they* and their communities are prone. For example, it is a source of perplexity and frustration to many Christian pastors, preachers and teachers that Christian people who have put their faith in the freely given love of God revealed in Jesus Christ find it so easy to carry images of God in their heads that are at odds with the good news they say they believe in – sometimes with pastorally damaging results. Here CSR accounts of “theological correctness” and “incorrectness” might helpfully come into play. CSR scholars such as Barrett and Jason Slone have investigated mismatches between what people say they believe and what they actually believe.<sup>77</sup> These can be understood in terms of the “cognitive biases and predilections”<sup>78</sup> that make it more difficult to believe and retain some theological ideas than others. Such a CSR-informed understanding of “theological incorrectness” could be of value in informing the practices of preaching, Christian education and pastoral care, as Barrett also suggests.<sup>79</sup>

But finally, this line of thought should also lead us theologians to turn the spotlight onto ourselves. Theologians are (of course) human beings with the same cognitive biases as others, and the same predilections for what Barth called “religion as faithlessness.” It is all too easy for these cognitive biases and predilections to distort our theological reasoning, so that our work becomes a less adequate response to revelation, a less truthful exercise of “faith seeking understanding.” CSR then could be a helpfully in developing a critical self-awareness about (some of) the biases that can compromise our own theological work.

## **Conclusion**

This essay has addressed the question: What (if anything) should Christian theology learn from CSR? I have considered reasons for thinking it might have nothing to learn, because CSR is irrelevant to Christian theology or is more likely to distort and mislead than illuminate it. I have argued that this is not the case: theologians need not and should not avoid engaging with CSR. They should however be careful and critical in their engagement, appropriating CSR insights into a theological understanding formed primarily by Scripture and the Church's history of reflecting thereon. I have proposed that Karl Barth's engagement with Ludwig Feuerbach, and Barth's theological critique of religion, offer an example of how to go about this critical engagement. Learning from Barth in this way sounds a cautionary note against trying to use CSR as a foundation for Christian faith, apologetics, or theology; but carefully and critically appropriated, insights from CSR can be of real value in informing the theological work of "faith seeking understanding." The illustrative examples I have very briefly sketched suggest that engagements with CSR should be of interest not only to theologians working in science and theology, but to those in diverse subdisciplines including theological anthropology and the theology of religions.

One thing I have not done is to address the opposite question: what CSR can learn from Christian theology. This is partly because I am a theologian, not a cognitive scientist, and it would seem presumptuous to try and tell scholars in another discipline how to do their work. Still, the foregoing account may well give hints and suggestions about some things I think Christian theology can offer to CSR; and I do believe that developing this interdisciplinary dialogue more broadly and deeply could benefit not just one, but both partners.

Acknowledgements: An earlier version of this article was given as a seminar paper at the Faraday Institute, Cambridge, UK, in February 2022. I am grateful for the invitation and the discussion on that occasion.

---

- <sup>1</sup> This article develops more fully some themes and ideas outlined in [Reference omitted for purposes of anonymous peer review].
- <sup>2</sup> Justin L. Barrett, “Cognitive Science of Religion: Looking Back, Looking Forward,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50, no. 2 (2011): 231.
- <sup>3</sup> Barrett, “CSR: Looking Back, Looking Forward,” 231.
- <sup>4</sup> Barrett, “CSR: Looking Back, Looking Forward,” 231.
- <sup>5</sup> Barrett, “CSR: Looking Back, Looking Forward,” 231.
- <sup>6</sup> E.g. Michael J. Murray and Andrew Goldberg, “Evolutionary Accounts of Religion: Explaining and Explaining Away,” in *The Believing Primate: Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Reflections on the Origin of Religion*, ed. Jeffrey Schloss and Michael J. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 183–9.
- <sup>7</sup> Justin L. Barrett, “Cognitive Science of Religion: What Is It and Why Is It?” *Religion Compass* 1, no. 6 (2007): 768–9; Barrett, “CSR: Looking Back, Looking Forward,” 231–2.
- <sup>8</sup> For some examples, see Barrett, “CSR: Looking Back, Looking Forward,” 232.
- <sup>9</sup> E.g. (among many others), Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Justin L. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004); Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).
- <sup>10</sup> See Murray and Goldberg, “Evolutionary Accounts of Religion,” 183–9.
- <sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Schloss, “Introduction: Evolutionary Theories of Religion; Science Unfettered or Naturalism Run Wild?” in Schloss and Murray, *The Believing Primate*, 17–20.
- <sup>12</sup> David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin’s Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- <sup>13</sup> E.g. Schloss, “Evolutionary Theories of Religion,” 25.
- <sup>14</sup> See Thomas Williams, “Saint Anselm,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2020 Edition), section 2.1.  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/anselm/> (accessed 05 April 2022).

- 
- <sup>15</sup> E.g. Ian G. Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000).
- <sup>16</sup> [Reference omitted for purposes of anonymous peer review.]
- <sup>17</sup> See [Reference omitted for purposes of anonymous peer review] for a survey of a wider range of possibilities.
- <sup>18</sup> Markus Mühling, *Resonances: Neurobiology, Evolution and Theology; Evolutionary Niche Construction, the Ecological Brain and Relational-Narrative Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2014), 222.
- <sup>19</sup> Mühling, *Resonances*, 92.
- <sup>20</sup> Mühling, *Resonances*, 95.
- <sup>21</sup> Mühling, *Resonances*, 96.
- <sup>22</sup> For some possible examples, see Barrett, “CSR: Looking Back, Looking Forward,” 232.
- <sup>23</sup> Mühling, *Resonances*, 96, citing Karl Barth’s theological critique of religion, to be discussed later in the present article.
- <sup>24</sup> Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 84.
- <sup>25</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 81, available at <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/> (accessed 05 April 2022); Harrison, *Territories*, 7–11.
- <sup>26</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, qq. 82–88.
- <sup>27</sup> Harrison, *Territories*, 7.
- <sup>28</sup> Harrison, *Territories*, 11–14.
- <sup>29</sup> Harrison, *Territories*, 13–14.
- <sup>30</sup> Harrison, *Territories*, 12.
- <sup>31</sup> Harrison, *Territories*, ch. 4.
- <sup>32</sup> Harrison, *Territories*, 84–89.
- <sup>33</sup> See R. Clinton Ohlers, “The Conflict Thesis and the Reification of ‘Science’ and ‘Religion’,” *Fides et Historia* 50, no. 1 (2018): 85–93.
- <sup>34</sup> It should be emphasised that Harrison is only responsible for the historical analysis, not the view of CSR that I have attached to it.
- <sup>35</sup> See the Prefatory Address to the *Institutes*: John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (2 vols., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d. [1845]), vol. 1: 3, 7.
- <sup>36</sup> Harrison, *Territories*, 83–84.
- <sup>37</sup> Wilson, *Darwin’s Cathedral*, 1.

- 
- <sup>38</sup> Barrett, “CSR: Looking Back, Looking Forward.”
- <sup>39</sup> Justin L. Barrett, “Could We Advance the Science of Religion (Better) Without the Concept ‘Religion’?” *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 7, no. 4 (2017): 282–4.
- <sup>40</sup> See, e.g., Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987).
- <sup>41</sup> See Todd Gooch, “Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2020 Edition), sections 4, 6.  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/ludwig-feuerbach/> (accessed 06 April 2022).
- <sup>42</sup> Gooch, “Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach,” section 4.
- <sup>43</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London: Trübner and Co., 1881), 14.
- <sup>44</sup> Gooch, “Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach,” section 4.
- <sup>45</sup> For wider surveys and critical discussions, see John Glasse, “Barth on Feuerbach,” *Harvard Theological Review* 57, no. 2 (1964): 69–96; Manfred H. Vogel, “The Barth-Feuerbach Confrontation,” *Harvard Theological Review* 59, no. 1 (1966): 27–52; Richard Paul Cumming, “Revelation as Apologetic Category: A Reconsideration of Karl Barth’s Engagement with Ludwig Feuerbach’s Critique of Religion,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68, no. 1 (2015): 43–60.
- <sup>46</sup> Especially Karl Barth, *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings, 1920–1928*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (London: SCM Press, 1962), 217–37; also Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History*, trans. Brian Cozens and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1972), 534–40.
- <sup>47</sup> Barth, *Theology and Church*, 217.
- <sup>48</sup> Barth, *Theology and Church*, 217.
- <sup>49</sup> Barth, *Theology and Church*, 227. Bruce McCormack, among others, has argued that Barth – in common with many of his contemporaries, including those who saw themselves as Schleiermacher’s successors – misunderstood Schleiermacher: *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), ch. 3. If so, Barth’s critique may be wide of the mark so far as Schleiermacher is concerned, but could still be apposite to those who followed him, including those of Barth’s teachers and contemporaries who understood themselves to be continuing Schleiermacher’s work.
- <sup>50</sup> Barth, *Theology and Church*, 230. Specifically, Barth mentions the way Luther wrote of faith as “almost a divine hypostasis, which moved and worked independently ... faith can on occasion be called a ‘creator of deity’ – even though only ‘in us’” (ibid.). Regarding the



---

incarnation, he cites “[t]he enthusiastic overemphasis with which Luther himself taught that the deity is to be sought not in heaven but on earth, in the *man*, the *man*, the man Jesus” (ibid., emphasis original).

- <sup>51</sup> Barth, *Theology and Church*, 236–7, emphasis original.
- <sup>52</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/2, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), §17.
- <sup>53</sup> Joshua Ralston, “Barth, Religion, and the Religions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, ed. Paul Dafydd Jones and Paul T. Nimmo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 637.
- <sup>54</sup> Ralston, “Barth, Religion, and the Religions,” 639; see also J. A. di Noia, O.P., “Religion and the Religions,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 244.
- <sup>55</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/2, §17.3.
- <sup>56</sup> Ralston, “Barth, Religion, and the Religions;” di Noia, “Religion and the Religions.”
- <sup>57</sup> Justin L. Barrett, *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology: From Human Minds to Divine Minds* (West Conshohocken: Templeton Press, 2011), 148–60.
- <sup>58</sup> Barrett bases this premise on the “commonsense epistemology” of the eighteenth century philosopher Thomas Reid and Reid’s present-day successors in the school of “Reformed epistemology”: *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology*, 155–6.
- <sup>59</sup> Paul Bloom, “Religious Belief as an Evolutionary Accident,” in Schloss and Murray, *The Believing Primate*, 118–27; Matthew Braddock, “Debunking Arguments and the Cognitive Science of Religion,” *Theology and Science* 14, no. 3 (2016): 268–87.
- <sup>60</sup> Barrett, *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology*, 155–6.
- <sup>61</sup> Justin L. Barrett and Ian M. Church, “Should CSR Give Atheists Epistemic Assurance? On Beer-Goggles, BFFs, and Skepticism Regarding Religious Beliefs,” *The Monist* 96 no.3 (2013): 311–24.
- <sup>62</sup> E.g. that humans’ theory of mind gives generally reliable information about the minds of other material beings, but not about the minds of supernatural beings.
- <sup>63</sup> Barrett and Church, “Should CSR Give Atheists Epistemic Assurance?” 316–7, drawing on Michael J. Murray, “Scientific Explanations of Religion and the Justification of Religion Belief,” in Schloss and Murray, *The Believing Primate*, 168–78.
- <sup>64</sup> They would not necessarily be, because it is conceivable that some false beliefs are adaptive (as the authors of some adaptationist theories of religion believe, e.g. Wilson, *Darwin’s Cathedral*); but this nuance can be ignored for present purposes.
- <sup>65</sup> For a similar objection, see Braddock, “Debunking Arguments and CSR,” 278–80.
- <sup>66</sup> Barrett and Church, “Should CSR Give Atheists Epistemic Assurance?” 317–8.

- 
- <sup>67</sup> E.g. Joshua D. Greene, “Beyond Point-and-Shoot Morality: Why Cognitive (Neuro)Science Matters for Ethics,” *Ethics* 124 (2014): 695–726. Indeed, Barrett himself makes a similar contrast between intuitive and reflective thinking in his account of “theological correctness,” discussed below: Justin L. Barrett, “Theological Correctness: Cognitive Constraints and the Study of Religion,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 11, no. 4 (1999): 325–39.
- <sup>68</sup> Barrett, *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology*, 133–4; Barrett and Church, “Should CSR Give Atheists Epistemic Assurance?” 319.
- <sup>69</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper, 1957), 195–6. This remark too was directed rather unfairly at Schleiermacher, but may well have been nearer the mark with respect to those who took themselves to be his successors.
- <sup>70</sup> Barrett, *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology*, 147–8, 160–7; cf. Alister E. McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe: The Quest for God in Science and Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), ch. 3. Considering Barth’s well-known aversion to natural theology, it might seem surprising to associate him with this suggestion. However, McGrath suggests that such a “confessional natural theology” is not what Barth rejected, but may be closer to Barth’s own theological approach (*A Fine-Tuned Universe*, 18–20).
- <sup>71</sup> Barrett, *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology*, 160–7.
- <sup>72</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.3.1, 4.1.
- <sup>73</sup> Barrett, *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology*, 161–2.
- <sup>74</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.4.1.
- <sup>75</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/2, 285.
- <sup>76</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.11.8.
- <sup>77</sup> Barrett, “Theological Correctness”; D. Jason Slone, *Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn’t* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Slone’s account, however, is somewhat simplistic in some respects, for example making inaccurate and un-nuanced assertions about how theological reasoning works (e.g. 87), as some reviews have also suggested: e.g. Leslie J. Francis, “Book Review: Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn’t,” *Theology* 108, no. 842 (2005): 148–9; Michael Stausberg, “Book Review: Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn’t,” *Numen* 52 (2005): 149–51.
- <sup>78</sup> Barrett, “CSR: Looking Back, Looking Forward”, 231.

---

<sup>79</sup> E.g. Barrett, *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology*, 165–7; Justin L. Barrett, “Cognitive Science of Religion and Christian Faith: How May They Be Brought Together?” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 69, no. 1 (2017): 3–12. For some fascinating related reflections, see David W. Kling, “Jonathan Edwards, Petitionary Prayer, and the Cognitive Science of Religion,” *Theology and Science* 18, no. 1 (2020): 113–36.