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Is Christian Belief Supernatural? Grace, Nature and the Cognitive Science of Religion

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Abstract: The Cognitive Science of Religion represents a contemporary attempt at a naturalistic explanation of religion. There is debate as to whether its account of how religious beliefs arise is reconcilable with the religious account, which holds that religious beliefs are caused by God. In my paper, I argue that these two accounts cannot be reconciled when it comes to the specific question of how Christian religious beliefs arise if one accepts an important theological doctrine of the supernaturality of Christian belief. This doctrine implies that there can be no natural explanation for how Christian beliefs arise because they are a gift of divine grace. This leads to a conundrum for Christian theists: they can either reject the CSR account of how their religious beliefs arise, or they can reject the supernaturality of Christian belief. I argue that the latter is preferable. I then draw on the work of the theologian Denis Edwards to illustrate how one can drop this doctrine without abandoning some other fundamental tenets of Christian theology.

Keywords: Cognitive science of religion, Grace and nature, Christian belief, Divine action, Denis Edwards

1. Introduction

At least since the publishing of David Hume's *Natural History of Religion* (2007 [1757]), various attempts have been made to explain religion as a purely natural phenomenon. The most famous of these include Ludwig Feuerbach's theory of alienation (1957 [1841]), later developed by Karl Marx (2012 [1843]), and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical account of religion as rooted in wishful thinking (Freud 1961 [1927]). What these various attempts had in common was their drive to "demystify" (to use Robert Nola's phrase [2018, 86]) religious beliefs by showing their "real" anthropological, economic or psychological causes, thus contradicting the religious narrative which ascribes their origins to the activity of some supernatural being(s). The most recent of such attempts was made by scholars (Dawkins 2006, Nola 2018) who suggest that theories developed within the Cognitive Science of Religion [CSR] are in

tension with the hypothesis of supernatural origins of religious beliefs—a tension Hans Van Eyghen has labeled "the conflict of causes" and expressed in the following way:

> CSR theories claim that religious belief is caused by cognitive mechanisms and evolutionary pressures, while religious believers claim it is caused by a supernatural being. (2020, 69)

In response, some authors (e.g., Clark 2019, Van den Brink 2020) have proposed that the causal activity of God and of the evolved cognitive mechanisms described by CSR are not mutually exclusive. Their solution is to postulate an overarching explanatory framework in which both God and natural processes contribute to the formation of religious beliefs in different ways, with God playing the role of the ultimate or the first cause, and natural processes acting as immediate or secondary causes. In this paper, I shall argue that if the important theological notion of the supernaturality of Christian belief is assumed, then this strategy of responding to the conflict of causes fails in the specific case of Christian religious beliefs. The notion states that it is impossible for humans to believe by their natural powers in the truth of central Christian doctrines, such as the divinity of Christ or the Trinity, unless they are transformed by divine grace. I will argue that the doctrine of the supernaturality of Christian belief precludes the possibility of there being a natural, scientific explanation of how such beliefs arise, like the one offered by CSR. This, as we shall see, places a Christian in a quandary: they can either reject the CSR account of how their religious beliefs are formed, or they can reject the supernaturality of Christian belief. Although both options come with some theological costs, I argue that the latter is preferable. I then draw on the work of the theologian Denis Edwards to illustrate how one can drop the supernaturality of Christian belief without abandoning some other fundamental tenets of Christian theology concerning human dependence on God in the process of salvation and the role of grace in coming to belief.

The paper has the following structure. I begin by giving a general overview of how CSR explains the emergence of religious beliefs, including Christian beliefs (§2). I reconstruct a prominent theistic response to the conflict of causes, calling on the works of Gijsbert van den Brink and Kelly James Clark (§3). In section (§4) I introduce the doctrine of the supernaturality of Christian belief with reference to Thomas Aquinas and Alvin Plantinga. I examine the theological motivation behind this doctrine and its implications for the conflict of causes. I then formulate a dilemma for a Christian theist as to whether to reject or uphold the supernaturality of Christian belief (§5). Finally, I introduce Denis Edwards' conception of grace and apply it to the question of how Christian religious beliefs arise (§6). The discussion ends with a brief conclusion (§7).

2. How Religious Beliefs Arise—the Cognitive-scientific Account

Hume famously distinguished two questions about religion: a question about its foundation in reason, and a question about its origins in human nature ([1757] 2007, 124). One way to approach the Cognitive Science of Religion is to view it as an attempt to answer the latter. Drawing on theories of cognitive and developmental psychology, evolutionary anthropology and neuroscience, CSR attempts to explain religious beliefs and behaviors as arising from the workings of natural, evolved human cognitive mechanisms (as a by-product of natural selection). As Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt explain (2020, 130), the word "natural" here "does not necessarily mean religious beliefs are innate . . ., but that such beliefs come relatively easily, with little formal instruction, as part of ordinary human development and socialization." In pursuing its goal, CSR assumes methodological naturalism—a commitment to accounting for religious phenomena without reference to any supernatural beings (Leech and Visala 2011a, 553).

The character of CSR explanations was well summarized by Claire White (2021, 28): "CSR scholars accept that religion is a product of the mind situated in its cultural environment." Cognitive scientists of religion point to the evolved, pan-human cognitive tendencies that make us prone to representing and believing in invisible agent(s) (hyperactive agent detection device; Barrett 2004) that have minds (theory of mind; Tremlin 2006, 80–86), that have arranged important life events to communicate their intentions to humans (existential theory of mind; Bering 2002), that have designed the natural world (intuitive teleology; Kelemen 2004), that are responsible for both human suffering and positive events, such as escaping harm or suddenly recovering from illness (hyperactive moral agent detection device; Gray and Wegner 2010), and that display superpowers, such as omniscience (Barrett and Richert 2003).

These supernatural beings are represented as social agents that possess strategic information about humans and as such are able to elicit deep emotional attachment from believers (Tremlin 2006, 109–132). CSR theories also account for our beliefs in the afterlife (Bering 2002), as well as the structural features of religious rituals and ceremonies (McCauley and Lawson 2002; White 2021, 255–301).

However, some researchers stress that these cognitive mechanisms alone cannot sufficiently account for why an individual would adopt content-specific religious beliefs characteristic of a particular religious tradition; for example, that Muhammad was the last prophet of God, or that God is triune (Leech and Visala 2011b, 311; Gervais and Henrich 2010). Therefore, it is argued that a full explanation of how religious beliefs arise must also take into account the cultural milieu in which an individual lives. For this reason, many CSR scholars also point to the importance of context biases, which favor particular religious representations because of the circumstances in which they are presented. These mechanisms play an important evolutionary role in enabling human beings to avoid being deceived and to acquire adaptive information from others. They include, for example, the tendency to accept what the majority of people in a given community believes, or the tendency to imitate prestigious individuals

(Gervais, et al. 2011, 392). Another important role is that of rituals, which reinforce and familiarize the often counter-intuitive and complicated content of religious beliefs, thus bolstering their credibility (De Cruz 2014, 491). Studies also reveal that a very significant role in the specific religious beliefs that an individual adopts is served by CREDs (credibility-enhancing displays): behaviors that demonstrate religious commitment, such as prayer, adherence to a religion's moral principles, or participation in rituals. We tend to adopt beliefs that are supported by relevant CREDs (Lanman and Buhrmester 2017, 12).

This brief overview was intended to give a general insight into how CSR explains the formation of religious beliefs: they are formed as a result of the operations of evolved cognitive mechanisms in a particular cultural context.[1] In this way, CSR offers to explain not only the general human tendency toward some form of religiosity, but also the specific religious beliefs that distinguish adherents of different religions from one another. Importantly for later considerations, this also extends to the core Christian religious beliefs, that is, beliefs that Christians hold *as Christians* (and not simply as theists or supernaturalists), such as the belief in the divinity of Christ, or the belief in his salvific death on the cross.

The conflict of causes is based on the assumption that such a naturalistic answer to the question of how religious beliefs arise is incompatible with the religious answer, which holds that religious beliefs are caused by God (Van Eyghen 2020, 66; 68–69). If the former answer is true, then the latter must be false, and vice versa: it is not possible that *both* God and evolved cognitive mechanisms are responsible for causing religious beliefs. In the next section, I will present a popular theistic strategy of answering the conflict of causes, which denies this very assumption. Afterwards, I will attempt to show that the application of this strategy to the specific problem of how core Christian religious beliefs arise is hampered by what some forms of Christian theology say about the causes of those beliefs.

3. A Plantinga-style Theistic Response to the Conflict of Causes

The extant responses to the conflict of causes may be divided into two kinds, depending on whether they assume the CSR explanation of religious beliefs to be causally sufficient, relative to the world of natural causes and effects (that is, if we bracket the metaphysical question of whether God is the author of the natural world as such). Authors such as David Leech and Aku Visala claim that the CSR explanation is not causally sufficient in this regard as it cannot account for the formation of content-specific religious beliefs, like the belief that Jesus is divine (2011b, 311–312).[2] This leaves room for the possibility that God acts as the more-proximate cause of such beliefs, alongside the cognitive mechanisms described by CSR. As I am more interested

[1] For a more extended treatment of how CSR explains the origins of religious beliefs, see: White (2021), ch. 7; Kvandal (2022), ch. 2-3; Ruczaj (2022).

[2] See Lim (2016, 955–956) for other examples of this strategy and its criticism.

here in the second kind of response, I will only briefly observe that this reasoning employs a narrower understanding of CSR that does not include the causal role of cultural factors in the etiology of religious beliefs. However, if one assumes, like I do in this paper, a broader conception of CSR, then arguing for the causal insufficiency of CSR becomes harder.[3]

The second group of responses could be interpreted as adapting the broader strategy outlined by Plantinga in response to Freudian and Marxist 'complaints' about religion (Plantinga 2000, chapter 5). Freud and Marx put forward naturalistic accounts of religious belief as, accordingly, a result of wishful thinking and a form of alienation. Plantinga reads these accounts as attempting to discredit the rationality of religious belief by showing that it stems from unreliable cognitive mechanisms (a strategy known as 'debunking'—see Kahane 2019; Braddock 2016). He replies:

> To show that there are natural processes that produce religious belief does nothing, so far, to discredit it; perhaps God designed us in such a way that it is by virtue of those processes that we come to have knowledge of him. (2000, 145)

What is important here is that this line of reasoning can be easily employed to resolve the conflict of causes. The fact that we are offered a naturalistic explanation of how religious beliefs arise does not force us to reject the claim that God causes these beliefs as God may very well have designed humans to form religious beliefs in such a natural way. This reasoning works even under the assumption that the naturalistic explanation is causally sufficient in the sense indicated above.[4] Let's take a closer look at two recent exemplifications of this strategy of responding to the conflict of causes.

In his 2019 book *God and the Brain: The Rationality of Belief*, Kelly James Clark uses the distinction between ultimate and immediate causes of religious beliefs ("God-beliefs") to show how both natural cognitive mechanisms and God could be causally responsible for the formation of religious beliefs. He describes a scenario in which God created the universe and overlooked the evolution of human beings so that they would develop a natural inclination ("God-faculty") to form religious beliefs:

> If God is the first and originating cause of the universe (including all natural laws), and if God were to guide or direct the evolutionary processes so that they produced a God-faculty so that people could and would come to form true beliefs about God and come into an appropriate relationship with God, then God would be the ultimate cause of our God-beliefs. (. . .) God may not be directly or immediately involved in the production of God-beliefs, to be sure. But the cause of one's beliefs need not be direct or immediate. (2019, 125)

[3] Those unconvinced by this quick dismissal can take my reasoning in the rest of the article to operate on the conditional assumption that the CSR account is causally sufficient.

[4] I would like to pre-emptively point out, however, that it is doubtful whether Plantinga himself – given his own conception of faith in *Warranted Christian Belief* – could use this solution for the conflict of causes when it comes to the question of how Christian religious beliefs arise. See section 4 of this paper, especially footnote 11.

Presuming that this "God-faculty" can be equated with the evolved cognitive mechanisms described by CSR, the conflict of causes finds a resolution as one can at the same time uphold both the claim that religious beliefs are caused by God (as their ultimate cause) and the claim that they are caused by the God-faculty (as their immediate cause). The CSR explanation can be considered causally sufficient within the boundaries of the natural world (it describes how exactly the cognitive processes immediately responsible for the emergence of religious beliefs work, and how they emerged in the course of evolution), while the religious explanation is concerned with the deeper, metaphysical relationship in which God finds himself with the natural world as its creator and as its provident sustainer.

Gijsbert van den Brink's approach in *Reformed Theology and Evolutionary Theory* (2020) invokes another important metaphysical distinction, namely that between the first cause and secondary causes. The author considers whether adherents of Christianity have reasons to believe in God and his revelation other than the fact that these beliefs provide a causal explanation of Christians' faith (e.g., arguments of natural theology). In such a case,

> . . . they can . . . very well interpret the data of CSR within this framework. They may, for instance, appeal to the classic dogmatic distinction between a divine first cause and immanent secondary causes, both of which can be at play at the same time. Evolutionary mechanisms, no doubt along with countless cultural factors, may serve as secondary causes that generate faith in God; God himself may be praised for being the primary source of his gracious self-revelation, sovereignly putting to his use any means he in his wisdom has selected. Indeed, theological selection precedes natural selection here. (2020, 319)

The concepts of the first cause and of secondary causes capture the precise character of the relationship between the activity of God and the operations of the evolved cognitive mechanisms that give rise to religious beliefs. The distinction (which will also prove important later in this article when discussing the theory of D. Edwards) is usually associated with Aquinas and his followers and goes beyond the ultimate-immediate distinction employed by Clark. On the Thomistic view, God is not only the ultimate cause of the universe, standing at the very beginning of the causal chain, but also immanently works through created beings (secondary causes) so that every effect which is produced by secondary causes is also, in its entirety, produced by God—a notion known as *double agency*[5]. As Simon Kittle (2022, 247, 249) explains, "God's primary causation is understood to be always and everywhere active. (...) Created

[5] The theory of double agency has a number of contemporary critics and defenders. Some argue that it is incoherent (Oppy 2014, 285–286), that it leads to the problem of causal overdetermination (Leidenhag 2019, 923–924), or that it unnecessarily magnifies the problem of evil (Abraham 2017, 179–185). For exposition and defense of this theory in the context of science-religion debates, see, e.g., Dodds (2012), Tabaczek (2016), Silva (2021).

substances are labeled 'secondary causes' to indicate that they are causally efficacious, but their causal efficacy relies on God's working in and through them." The implication of this view for the issue of the etiology of religious beliefs is that whenever evolved cognitive mechanisms operating in appropriate cultural circumstances give rise to such beliefs, God is acting through these mechanisms. Thus, on this view, the conflict of causes is resolved because it is possible to simultaneously claim that God is the first cause of religious beliefs and that religious beliefs have a causally sufficient explanation relative to the natural world (the realm of the secondary causes).

The common point of such approaches is that they allow for the possibility that religious beliefs have a causally sufficient natural explanation, given that there is a universe and human beings equipped with certain cognitive mechanisms. In this respect, these approaches agree with Hume's idea that religion originates in human nature. However, in the spirit of Plantinga's response to the criticisms of Marx and Freud, they deny that discovering the way the human mind naturally gives rise to religious belief disproves the divine cause of faith. It is God who is the author of nature, including the human mind and the ways it operates. In this way, the causal claims of cognitive science and of religion turn out to be compatible. The former, in accordance with the principle of methodological naturalism, refer only to the realm of natural processes, while the latter capture God's metaphysical relation to the natural world (i.e., his role as the ultimate or the first cause). It seems noteworthy that the application of this Plantingian strategy can go well beyond the specific case of the alleged conflict between religious and CSR explanations of the etiology of religious beliefs. In the words of Peter van Inwagen, any naturalistic account of a phenomenon can always be incorporated into a 'larger' and 'more comprehensive' supernatural explanation of the phenomenon (Van Inwagen 2009, 134).

Having discussed strategies for responding to the conflict of causes, I can now move on to present what some important Christian thinkers have said about the causes of Christian religious beliefs. As will soon become clear, the doctrine of the supernaturality of Christian belief implies the rejection of the assumption on which the above resolution to the conflict of causes is based, namely that religious belief is natural.

4. The Supernaturality of Christian Belief and the Conflict of Causes

By appealing solely to natural cognitive mechanisms, CSR offers an explanation of how religious beliefs arise, including the specific beliefs of particular religious traditions such as Christianity. In contrast, some important Christian thinkers have argued that core Christian religious beliefs, such as the belief that Jesus is Lord, that he died on the cross for our salvation, or that God is triune, arise supernaturally. In this section I will outline this position, taking as examples two philosophers already referenced above: Thomas Aquinas and Alvin Plantinga. Both hold that such beliefs are an essential part of faith and special supernatural divine action is required for their formation. I will then highlight the important theological motivation behind this

position: the scriptural claim that faith is a gift of God (a work of grace). I will subsequently explain why the claim that Christian beliefs are supernaturally produced prevents the application of the Plantinga-style strategy of resolving the conflict of causes to the specific question of how these beliefs arise.

According to Thomas Aquinas, faith has an important cognitive dimension in that it involves believing in the truth of certain propositions revealed by God (*S. Th.*, 2-2.1.2; Davies 1993, 275–277). The necessity of supernatural divine grace is what distinguishes distinctively Christian beliefs from beliefs of natural theology, such as that God exists or that God is simple, which can be formed by philosophical reasoning (*S. Th.*, 1.2.2). To acknowledge Jesus as God, or to believe that God is one in the Trinity, it is not enough to hear a stirring sermon or even to witness a miracle because the truth of these propositions is beyond the reach of human reason (Osborne 2018, 203): one needs "another inner cause which moves man inwardly to assent to matters of faith". Grace is this internal cause, enabling a person to believe by "raising" (elevating, perfecting) their human nature:

> . . . since man, by assenting to matters of faith, is raised above his nature, this must needs accrue to him from some supernatural principle moving him inwardly; and this is God. Therefore faith, as regards the assent which is the chief act of faith, is from God moving man inwardly by grace." (*S. Th.*, 2–2.6.1)

Grace overcomes the natural limitations of human reason by transforming the will of an individual so that they give assent to something which they find attractive, even though they cannot rationally prove it.

Alvin Plantinga also emphasizes the importance of the cognitive aspect of Christian faith. In his view, "even if faith is more than cognitive, it is also and at least a cognitive activity. It is a matter of believing . . . something or other" (2000, 247). Following John Calvin, Plantinga famously postulates the existence of *sensus divinitatis* (sense of divinity)—a natural human cognitive faculty that, in response to a variety of stimuli, generates basic theistic beliefs, such as that there is a God or that God has forgiven my sins (2000, ch. 6).[6] *Sensus divinitatis,* however, is not sufficient to produce beliefs in the core truths of the Gospel. For this, a separate, supernatural process is needed, which Plantinga refers to as "internal instigation of the Holy Spirit" (Beilby 2007, 131). The Spirit

> . . . gets us to see and believe that the propositions proposed for our beliefs in Scripture really *are* a word from the Lord. . . . The Holy Spirit not only writes the letter (appropriately inspires the human authors) but also does something special to enable you to believe and appropriate its contents. (Plantinga 2000, 252)

[6] There is debate about the extent to which the cognitive mechanisms that CSR postulates as giving rise to religious belief can be identified with *sensus divinitatis*. See, e.g., Barrett and Clark (2010), Jong, Kavanagh and Visala (2015), Van Eyghen (2016), Kvandal (2020).

What is important for my present purposes is that both Aquinas and Plantinga agree[7] that man's natural cognitive powers are not sufficient to form Christian religious beliefs. In order to arrive at such beliefs, a special supernatural act of God is required which transforms the nature of human beings.

The important theological motivation for this position on how Christian beliefs arise can be found in the biblical doctrine that faith is a gift from God, or, in other words, that it is caused by grace. A plausible reading of John 6:44 ("No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me") suggests that for a person to come to faith in Christ, the initiative must spring from God. Paul expresses a similar belief by explicitly drawing a link between faith and salvation in Ephesians 2:8: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God". For salvation to be gratuitous ("by grace"), its prerequisite—faith—must also be gratuitous, namely "a gift of God". Thus, the doctrine plays an important theological function by safeguarding the idea that human salvation depends on God and it is not within our powers to save ourselves.[8] The classical Christian way of interpreting the claim that faith is a gift of God is to maintain that it is supernaturally produced. In the words of Roman Catholic theologian Avery Dulles, "faith is a gift of God over and above the gift of being human. . . . The act of faith is impossible unless the mind and heart of the believer are interiorly moved by divine grace" (Dulles 1994, 224). Insofar as the act of faith involves forming Christian beliefs, the supernaturality of Christian belief is a corollary of the supernaturality of faith.[9]

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[7] One might want to explain the similarities between the approaches of Aquinas and Plantinga by referring to the fact that Plantinga draws inspiration from Aquinas and Calvin in constructing his model of rational faith in *Warranted Christian Belief*. However, it seems to me that Plantinga's model of faith cannot be reduced to the theories of either of these thinkers and can therefore be considered an independent proposal.

[8] Some theologians may argue, in line with the inclusivist position in theology of religions, that Christian faith is not a necessary prerequisite of salvation, as God can save the adherents of other religious traditions. However, this does not imply that the salvation of non-Christians does not depend on God's grace in some other ways (see Moyaert (2011, 22–33) for a discussion of inclusivism). In any case, you can take my comments as referring exclusively to the way in which *Christians* depend on God for their salvation.

[9] Two important qualifications are in order. First, there are notable conceptions of faith which treat it not as a (primarily) cognitive matter but rather as a form of trusting relationship with God. See, e.g., the Lutheran conception of faith as described by William Lad Sessions (1994, 180–192). Other trust-centered models of faith are described by John Bishop and Daniel J. McKaughan (2022, §6). In such conceptions, the supernaturality of faith does not have to imply the supernaturality of Christian belief. Second, one may acknowledge the importance of the cognitive dimension of faith but still maintain that Christian religious beliefs do not *necessarily* require a supernatural divine grace. Here, it is instructive to invoke some Reformed theologians' distinction between human (or historical) and divine faith (see Vos 2015 [1910], 76–77), or some Roman Catholics' distinction between natural and supernatural faith (see Richard 2018 for an overview). Faith which is human or natural includes beliefs which a person holds because of their upbringing or on historical and philosophical grounds. Faith which is supernatural or divine is supernaturally produced by God. As Geerhardus Vos puts it (76), "Some accept the divine origin of Scripture on historical grounds; others accept it on the basis of the testimony of the Holy Spirit." Accepting the above distinction thus undermines the claim that grace is necessary

Now that I have outlined the notion of the supernaturality of Christian religious belief and briefly discussed its theological underpinnings, I can turn to examining its implications for a potential solution to the conflict of causes. It seems to me that to accept the claim that Christian belief is supernatural entails the dismissal of any methodologically naturalistic account of the origins of Christian belief which has a claim to causal sufficiency. If there were such an account, it would mean that, pace Aquinas, assenting to matters of faith does not demand that human beings are "raised above their nature", or that, pace Plantinga, the Holy Spirit does not have to "enable" us to believe the propositions revealed in the gospel. Thus, a Christian who is committed to the supernaturality of Christian belief has to reject the CSR account sketched in (2).

This will become clearer if one compares the process of forming Christian beliefs to a miracle. According to one prominent definition, miracles are events which "exceed the productive power of nature" (McGrew 2019, §1.1). This means that God has to either bypass or transform the natural order so that a miracle (such as turning water into wine, or the sudden disappearance of a cancerous tumor) may take place. For Aquinas, for example, God brings about a certain event directly in miracles, without the mediation of secondary causes (Davies 1992, 171). However, this direct divine involvement makes miraculous events opaque for science: confronted with a true miracle, scientists can, at best, ascertain that an event lacks an explanation in terms of natural causes.[10] Suppose now someone assumes at the outset that a certain event is a miracle in the indicated sense. Under this assumption, such a person would be inclined to reject any purported natural explanation for the event as necessarily either incomplete or altogether incorrect. After all, a miracle, by definition, cannot have a natural explanation. It seems to me that someone who, for theological reasons, believes that Christian belief is supernatural is in a similar situation. To say that there is a natural explanation for its origins would be tantamount to rejecting its supernatural character.

What does this mean for the conflict of causes? You may recall that it relies on the purported incompatibility between the religious and the scientific claims concerning the origins of religious belief. The notion that Christian beliefs are supernatural entails—as far as the origins of those beliefs are concerned—that the incompatibility is, in fact, real. More precisely, if one thinks that Christian beliefs are caused by divine grace and takes this to imply that they are supernatural, one cannot at the same time believe that they are produced by the natural causes described by CSR. From this, it is also clear why the Plantinga-style solution employed by Clark and Van den Brink

for the formation of Christian beliefs. However, there still remains the problem of how to reconcile naturalistic (whether offered by CSR or by some other secular theory of religion) and theological explanations in the case of those Christian beliefs which constitute divine/supernatural faith. I am grateful to the anonymous Reviewer for their insistence on these clarifications.

[10] This is attested by the way in which the Roman Catholic Church determines whether a miracle has taken place, which is an important part of the canonization process. A special commission has to rule out the possibility that the purportedly miraculous event has a natural explanation (Ebdrup 2012).

cannot be applied to the case of Christian belief.[11] They propose reconciling the religious and the scientific claims concerning the causes of religious belief by employing a strict "division of labor" between God and the natural processes described by CSR. God's causal role in the formation of religious beliefs is carefully delineated as that of the ultimate or the first cause, while the natural processes act as immediate or secondary causes.[12] In playing his role, God does not replace the activity of these processes with his own activity and does not alter their natural way of functioning. For this reason, it is possible to construct a causally sufficient natural explanation of the formation of religious beliefs. However, according to the supernaturality of Christian belief thesis, God's role in the formation of Christian beliefs cannot be restricted in this way: God is not only the author of the natural world (or even the first cause acting through secondary causes), but he also actively modifies, by means of grace, the creaturely natures he designed. One can therefore say that it is not the case that God designed us in such a way that we come to have Christian beliefs simply by virtue of some natural processes.

5. Two Options for a Christian Theist

If one accepts that Christian beliefs are supernaturally produced, one must then also reject the idea that there is a sufficient naturalistic explanation for their etiology (such as the one offered by CSR). This means that the conflict of causes is real when it comes to the question of how Christian beliefs arise. At this point, a Christian faces two choices: first, they can reject the scientific explanation of the formation of their religious beliefs, choosing instead the fidelity to their theological convictions; second, they can reject the thesis of the supernaturality of Christian belief. Each of these options comes at a cost.

As for the first option, it involves two basic problems. First, to say that there indeed is a contradiction between theological and scientific claims about the origins of Christian beliefs is problematic from the point of view of a prominent strand of Christian theology that views science and religion as complementary ways to discover the truth about reality. According to this tradition of thought, expressed historically in the metaphor of two books (the book of the Works of God [i.e., nature], and the book of the Word of God [i.e., the Bible]—Lamoureux 2016, 181), and more recently, for example, by the Second Vatican Council, good science can never lead to conclusions that contradict Christian doctrines: "if methodical investigation within every branch

[11] Paradoxically, then, the Plantinga-style solution to the conflict of causes cannot be applied to the question of how Christian beliefs arise, if we accept what Plantinga himself says about their origins. Barring internal inconsistency, it is likely that his response to the Marxian and Freudian complaints was meant to apply only to basic theistic beliefs, which are produced by *sensus divinitatis* (2000, ch. 6), and not to Christian beliefs produced by the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit.

[12] Also useful here may be the concept of "levels of explanation" invoked by Jonathan Jong (2013, 527–528). On both accounts, the religious explanation could be said to operate at a higher level than the scientific explanation.

of learning is carried out in a genuinely scientific manner and in accord with moral norms, it never truly conflicts with faith, for earthly matters and the concerns of faith derive from the same God" (*Gaudium et spes* 36). The assumption seems to be that God, who is perfectly rational, would not create a reality that is inherently contradictory. Moreover, one could argue that God knows that people trust their cognitive faculties, which they exercise when practicing science. If he allowed people who diligently use these faculties in accordance with their designed purpose to come to conclusions which are false from the theological point of view[13], that would imply that he is a deceiver, *deus deceptor*. This, however, would cast a shadow on his perfect goodness.

In response, one could question the scientific credentials of CSR by arguing, e.g., that it is not sufficiently supported by data or that it employs invalid methodology (see Oviedo 2016 for further criticism), so that, in fact, it is not an example of *good* science. Many scholars agree, however, that CSR provides a viable and rational theoretical perspective on religion. As Halvor Kvandal noted in his book on the implications of CSR for theism, "Using the tools of the cognitive and evolutionary sciences (broadly understood) to explain religion is a promising approach. . . . The theories currently available are in my view sufficiently plausible to make their implications, if true, worth investigating philosophically..." (2022, 7). This is also the tentative assumption on which Van den Brink and Clark operate when they put forward their proposals for reconciling naturalistic and religious explanations of religious beliefs.

Let's assume, however, that this contention is wrong. It still remains true that someone who accepts the supernaturality of Christian belief must take a skeptical stance not only toward any extant naturalistic explanations of the etiology of Christian belief, but also toward the very possibility that a satisfactory naturalistic explanation will emerge in the future. In other words, his skepticism presupposes a certain prediction about the future of science. But predictions of this kind have already been made and were refuted by the subsequent progress of science. Examples include the famous Kantian claim that "it is quite certain that we can never adequately come to know the organized beings and their internal possibility in accordance with merely mechanical principles of nature, let alone explain them" (Kant 2002, 270–271). The theory of evolution has shown, however, that it is possible to explain the origins and complexity of living organisms without referring to divine intentions and teleology. It seems to me that whether in the future there will also be a cogent naturalistic explanation of the etiology of Christian belief is an open matter to be determined by future scientists, not by contemporary theologians.

What if we choose the second option and drop the supernaturality of Christian belief? Here, too, a theological problem looms because we have seen that the supernaturality of Christian belief is entangled with the more basic notion that faith is a work of God's grace (assuming, like Plantinga and Aquinas, that faith is—at least partially—'a cognitive activity'). This notion, in turn, plays an essential theological role

[13] "False" only if one assumes, as I do here, that the CSR explanation of how Christian beliefs arise is causally sufficient. Thanks to the anonymous Reviewer for pressing me on this point.

by emphasizing man's dependence on God in the process of salvation, of which faith is a prerequisite. Wouldn't abandoning the doctrine of the supernaturality of Christian belief lead to the rejection of the role of grace in coming to faith and to the undermining of this dependency? It seems to me that the best option for the Christian would be to seek an interpretation of the claim that faith (Christian beliefs) is a work of grace that would not compel the conclusion that faith (Christian beliefs) arises supernaturally, while still preserving, in some robust sense, the claim that man depends on God for his salvation. In other words, what is needed is a conception of grace that does not equate it with a divine intervention that changes the order of nature—one that does not make Christian belief a miracle that is necessarily opaque for science. Such a conception would make it possible to employ the Plantinga-style solution to the conflict of causes offered by Clark and Van den Brink in the specific case of the formation of Christian beliefs. In the next section, I will offer such an alternative conception of grace, drawing on Denis Edwards' theory of divine action in the created world. While Edwards' account is similar to Van den Brink's and Clark's in that it maintains that God's activity in the created world is not interventionist, it is important to note that Edwards expands on these accounts by explicitly discussing and reinterpreting the theological notion of grace and its relationship to nature. As we shall see, accepting Edwards' theory allows one to maintain—at the same time—that faith is not miraculous and that it is caused by grace. Significantly, what this theory illustrates is that dropping the supernaturality of Christian belief does not necessarily come at the high theological cost of denying that human salvation depends on God.

6. Edwards on grace and nature

As we have already seen, the claim that Christian belief is supernatural is based on a particular understanding of how grace works and how it relates to human nature. Grace enables humans to assent to core Christian doctrines—something they would not be able to do by their natural powers alone. Grace is thus supernatural: it is something opposed to nature. That Christian beliefs arise at all is akin to a miracle.

In his important book *How God Works. Creation, Redemption and Special Divine Action* (2010), Edwards presents an alternative conception of grace and its relation to nature. Edwards can be counted among the influential contemporary theologians and philosophers (among others, Christopher K. Knight, Amos Yong and Michael Dodds) that are sometimes called "theistic naturalists" and who opt for the theologically informed view of nature as "inherently involved with divine presence and agency at all times" (Ritchie 2017, 377). In line with these authors, Edwards considers divine action in the world as essentially *sacramental* in character, by which he means that it is always mediated by creatures:

> When God's grace is not only expressed but also communicated through the mediation of a creaturely reality, Christian theology sees this in sacramental terms. . . . God acts

> in the world through the mediation of creatures, through secondary causes. . . . divine action as such has a sacramental nature. (2010, 74)

Edwards adopts the essentially Thomistic model in which God's actions through the mediation of creatures are conceptualized as the actions of the first cause working through secondary causes (secondary causes include every natural process that the sciences could ever study (81)). These divine actions are always "objectively specific": they are "always specific to a particular entity or process" and "they have objective effects in the created world" (57–58). In a clear departure from Aquinas, however, Edwards argues that, out of love for his creatures, God never bypasses or transforms their natural ways of functioning: "... even in miracles, God acts in and through the known and unknown laws of nature" (84). So, not only does God always act through creatures, but He also acts in a way that does not override their natural limitations.[14] This directly translates into how Edwards views the relationship between grace and nature. As he puts it,

> The natural world with its laws is the means of God's self-revelation. God can give marvelous signs of grace to God's people without violating natural laws. ... God's grace can be understood as taking effect in a way that fully respects the integrity of nature at the physical and biological level as well as at the level of human freedom. (89)

On this view, then, grace is *not* supernatural. It is not mutually exclusive with nature. The fact that a certain event has a causally sufficient natural explanation does not imply that it is not caused by grace. This is where Edwards' theory adds to the approaches of Clark and Van den Brink, who also agree that God does not interfere with the activities of creatures, but do not discuss the implications of their position for the particular theological issue of grace and its relationship to nature. Edwards' position could thus be seen as the theological concretization of their more general positions on divine action in the created world. Accepting Edwards' conception of grace means that the CSR account of how Christian religious beliefs arise is reconcilable with the theological account: they could be said to be both caused by God by means of grace *and* to be caused by evolved cognitive mechanisms.

Such a response, however, could be accused of reconciling theological and scientific accounts at the price of depriving the word "grace" of any distinctive meaning. If grace is not supernatural, then what is it? After all, it may seem that "the very concept of grace requires that it be set against what is not-grace, that is, against nature" (Oakes 2016, 32). When he speaks of grace, Edwards seems to be referring to those objective actions of God that are expressions of his personal providence—that is, his care of

[14] For Edwards, love involves respecting the integrity and autonomy of the beings that are loved (2010, 48). God created the universe out of love, and for this reason he respects the natural limitations of his creatures. Edwards describes the act of divine creation as "an act of love, of risk-taking love, that enables the universe to run itself by its own laws, with its own integrity, so things behave in accordance with their own natures" (49).

human persons—which could be experienced or understood in a certain way. By acting through secondary causes, "God really comes to us, responds to us, and provides for us" (Edwards 2010, 69) and humans can (correctly) take or experience the effects of these actions as something that God does *for them*, "as a gift", "as providential" etc. Edwards gives the example of when a good idea comes to one's mind. This event has a natural explanation, but it can also be interpreted as an expression of personal providence, in which God gives this idea to a person by acting through secondary causes:

> If I do experience the good idea as a place of encounter with the living God, then I am surely right to think that the God who is present as Source of All in every aspect of creation is now really mediated to me in this event of a good idea. (2010, 69)

Another example is when someone suddenly feels deeply moved when listening to a reading from the Bible, even though they have heard the same words many times before. Here, the objective "divine action mediated through our own consciousness, our imaginations, our memories, and the prompting of circumstances" is experienced as "a word of challenge and grace" (71).

This dual emphasis on the objective and subjective dimensions of grace makes it possible to understand in what sense grace is the cause of faith. That an individual will form Christian beliefs is brought about by the multiple natural processes that the sciences (such as CSR) describe. God objectively manifests his personal providence by acting through these natural processes as the first cause acting through secondary causes. A believer can then subjectively perceive the event of him coming to faith as something miraculous, an undeserved gift, or a work of providence. The many vivid autobiographical narratives of conversion quoted by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (2008 [1901]) are good examples of such subjective perception; they manifest a subjective way of apprehending the objective divine work.

What speaks in favor of this revised conception of grace is that it gains points where its alternative loses them. First, it does not lead to the theologically problematic view in which science and religion contradict each other. For example, if CSR (or any other natural science) provides a cogent explanation of the etiology of Christian religious beliefs, a Christian could happily accept it without worrying that it disproves his theological commitment to the notion that those beliefs are caused by grace. Second, Edwards' position undermines the implication that there could never be a cogent natural explanation of arriving at Christian belief—an implication which could be easily proven wrong by the progress of science. In fact, on the grounds of Edwards' theory, there *must* be some natural explanation of how belief arises, even if scientists never actually manage to discover it and spell it out. This is because God does not act in the world without the mediation of creatures and without respecting their natural integrity.

Finally, what about the human dependence upon God in the process of salvation? Is there a way to make sense of this idea if we do away with the supernaturality of

Christian belief? Contra Aquinas and Plantinga, it follows from Edwards' position that it is within natural human powers to acquire Christian religious beliefs. This does not imply, however, that human salvation does not crucially hinge on God in a different sense. To see why, let's recall the details of the Thomistic account of the relationship between the First Cause and secondary causes. In this framework, the causal efficacy of secondary causes depends on God acting "in and through" them. Thus, every effect of the secondary cause is also attributable to God. As divine action extends to the whole of creation (God "is interiorly present to the whole creation and to every part of it, nearer to it than it is to itself" [Edwards 2010, 46]), it also includes the processes that lead to the formation of Christian religious beliefs, such as those postulated by CSR theorists. Thus, human dependence on God in the process of salvation lies in the fact that the formation of belief, like all natural processes, presupposes the activity of the First Cause.[15]

7. Conclusion

Cognitive Science of Religion represents a contemporary attempt at a naturalistic explanation of religion. There is debate as to whether its account of how religious beliefs arise stands in conflict with the religious explanation, which holds that religious beliefs are caused by God. For a theist, one popular way of resolving this conflict is to acknowledge that God makes use of the natural mechanisms described by CSR to produce religious beliefs. I have argued that this solution cannot be applied to the specific issue of how *Christian* religious beliefs arise if we accept the notion that Christian belief is supernatural. According to some Christian thinkers, such as Thomas Aquinas and Alvin Plantinga, it is impossible to form distinctively Christian beliefs unless aided by a supernatural divine grace. The doctrine is entangled with a more basic, scriptural notion that faith (which, on some models, is primarily a cognitive activity) is a work of divine grace, which in turn safeguards the notion that human beings depend on God in their salvation. I have shown that accepting the supernaturality of Christian belief is tantamount to saying that there can be no naturalistic explanation of how such belief arises. Therefore, the conflict of causes remains for a Christian who espouses the supernaturality of Christian belief. Such a Christian faces the following dilemma: they can either reject CSR's naturalistic explanation of how their Christian beliefs arise (or, more generally, any naturalistic explanation of the origins of their beliefs), or they can reject the supernaturality of Christian belief. I have argued that the latter option is more preferable. However, anyone who chooses this option has to provide an alternative explanation of the claim

[15] Swafford (2014, 10–12) helpfully distinguishes between two senses in which creatures could be said to be dependent on God. First, they are dependent simply as creatures (as creation is a free gift of God). Second, they are dependent on God for the attainment of supernatural reality (they need the gift of grace, which is "over and above the natural order"). In a view like the Edwards model considered here, in which God does not act above or against nature, the difference between the two meanings becomes blurred.

that faith (Christian beliefs) is a work of divine grace—one which does not imply that Christian beliefs are supernatural. I have provided such an alternative interpretation, drawing on Denis Edwards' theory of divine action in the created world. In Edwards' view, grace is not supernatural. Thus, the fact that some events are caused by divine grace does not imply that they do not have a natural explanation. As a result, a Christian is no longer forced to choose between grace and nature[16] when pondering the question of how their belief came to be.[17]

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[16] In Ruczaj (2022) I made a case for the claim that the CSR theories make grace of faith redundant with regard to explaining the etiology of faith. In the conclusion of that paper, I posed an open question of whether a coherent position can ever be formulated that combines acceptance of naturalistic theories of the etiology of faith with recognition of the causal role of the grace of faith. I believe the conclusions of the present paper indirectly answer that question in the affirmative.

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