Atheism is only skin deep: Geertz and Markússon rely mistakenly on sociodemographic data as meaningful indicators of underlying cognition

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Abstract

Cognitive scientists of religion and evolutionary theorists alike have been increasingly arguing in recent years that religion is “natural” in the sense of being motivated by core, evolved psychological intuitions. Atheism, and irreligion more generally, appear to pose problems for the naturalness hypothesis, especially considering the significant proportion of people in contemporary societies who reject supernatural beliefs. Although Geertz and Markússon clarify why the naturalness hypothesis does not imply religious determinism, they fail to weigh adequately the more conservative prediction, that of religious probabilism. Furthermore, unlike cognitive scientific accounts favoring the naturalness hypothesis, the authors base their arguments for the cultural scaffolding of atheistic cognition on sociodemographic data alone—a source that is unlikely to be a meaningful reflection of “natural” underlying cognitive processes.

In their trenchant analysis of the cognitive bases of (a)theism, Geertz and Markússon (2010) have managed to peel apart multiple layers of complexity on this easily glossed over, emotionally fueled subject area. Their article is rich with important and unappreciated facts and should remind many scholars of religion of the old euphemism: “The more you learn, the less you know.” For the most part, the authors successfully navigate a dense interdisciplinary literature, with the result being a clear, scholarly presentation covering an impressive range of historical, sociological and psychological issues. If nothing else, Geertz and Markússon have done some much-needed conceptual housecleaning in a rather messy field of empirical inquiry— one that has for a very long time been polluted by rhetoric, politics, straw men and popular culture. In my opinion, this article should be mandatory reading for all students interested in the natural bases of religion; I am aware of no other that showcases the subtle intricacies and nuances of the debate like this one.

Having said that, and being cast in the role here of a critical reader, I believe that Geertz and Markússon make a few errors of their own in their critique of the “naturalness” theories of religion attributed to myself, Barrett and others (Barrett, 2004; Bering, 2006; Bloom, 2004; Boyer, 2001). At least, their understanding of some of the basic logic motivating these theories is questionable. In particular, the authors are skeptical of prior claims as to the unnaturalness of atheism— my arguing, along with other cognitive scientists of religion, that belief is a “cognitive default” and that, all else being equal, in any given cultural context religious beliefs are driven into expression by a universal, evolved, core set of psychological intuitions present in all normal human brains (Bering, 2002a, 2006).

But, as cultural variation tends to go, all else is not always equal, and there may be any number of reasons for religion to be underrepresented or absent altogether in contemporary societies. I may be guilty of the occasional excessive phrasing in some of the popular science accounts from which Geertz and Markússon have quoted me, but while the wording may be a little rich for some tastes, each of the ingredients is there for a reason. The “howling discontent of God” in atheistic thought is, in fact, an empirically demonstrable phenomenon, referring broadly to the traces of supernatural thinking that can often be found even in the nonbeliever’s representational systems. The authors, however, do not address these low-level, implicit, or altogether unconscious patterns of thinking. Instead, after reviewing sociodemographic data showing the prevalence of irreligion—which indeed constitutes considerable belief variance in the modern world—they conclude:

...human cognition is always situated within a natural habitat of cultural systems, [thus] we find that atheism is no less natural than religiosity is. We are therefore critical of the cognitive science of religion accounts of atheism and their unsupported assumptions about atheists.
Whether or not Geertz and Markússon were simply careless in their use of this term, their conflation of religiosity with religious intuition here and elsewhere reveals a fundamental confusion. Religiosity, of course, implies a full epistemological commitment to an already well-articulated, culturally defined set of theistic or supernatural ideas (e.g., Hill and Hood, 1999). One can, of course, be “low” on the scale of religiosity, a hypothetical value of zero relegating the individual to the atheistic category. In most cases, such epistemological commitment, whether belief or disbelief, leads to behavioral expression. But religiosity, like any manifest psychological trait, is certainly not an isomorphic reflection of underlying cognition. Instead, it may reflect merely individual differences in the person’s “handling” of universal cognitive processing outputs. The authors are absolutely right when they say that the naturalness arguments do not imply any form of religious determinism. And they are right to use cross-cultural data and the burgeoning New Atheist sociopolitical movement to discredit any such models of determinism. But let me go on record as saying that religious belief, though it is by no means deterministic, is still a highly probabilistic phenomenon. It is this probabilism that captures the naturalness stance, something that Geertz and Markússon address only superficially.

Atheism, in my view, is by no means an impossible thing, but the limited evidence at this point does suggest strongly that it is cognitively effortful. Furthermore, whether or not someone considers him- or herself to be an atheist, the truth is that this self-classification has little—if any—hearing on what actually happens inside their head. By focusing on population-level data (e.g., the significant percentage of individuals in Scandinavian societies who profess not to believe in God) the authors mistake verbally expressed belief of the type captured in surveys and self-reports for intuitive cognitive processing styles endemic to these cultural groups. Although it is true that the naturalness hypothesis awaits further and more rigorous testing in diverse societies, to claim on the basis of survey data that people in irreligious communities are immune to the same systems of thought regarding such things as supernatural agents, the soul and intelligent design arguably requires a much greater leap of faith than the alternative. Indeed, knowing what we already do about the intuitive aspects of religious thought (which is discussed in more detail by Barrett in his response to Geertz and Markússon’s article), the naturalness hypothesis is clearly the more parsimonious account given the present state of the field.

Note that my recalcitrance in trusting common polling data to reveal much of anything psychological is orthogonal to the question of whether we should care if an actually cause cognition. Even if culture does serve to shape representational processes, relying on survey reports as a measure of such causal influences would be at best unwise, given that there can be any number of reasons why self-reports fail to align with implicit or even explicit thinking. This is especially the case when one is investigating the cognitive bases of religion, since due to the very same heated, secularized sociopolitical conditions that the authors discuss in the first half of their article, admitting that one is vulnerable to superstitious or quasi-religious thinking is for many people unpalatable (Preston and Epley, 2009). In fact, is it altogether possible that some self-classified atheists are in many respects more “religious” than self-classified religious people.

This problem with construct validity in survey methods is the very reason that cognitive scientists of religion and other proponents of the naturalness hypothesis rely on controlled, mostly experimental methods to investigate the psychological underpinnings of religion; and it is the results from these methods—not theoretical conjecture, survey data, or opinion—which form the empirical basis of our claims. Thus, stating that atheism is psychologically unnatural is not the same as saying that it is culturally non-normative. Under many political, economic, and sociological conditions, atheism—in the propositional sense of rejecting supernatural ideas as fallacious and/or in conflict with naturalistic principles—is clearly the normative mode. But what this says about the underlying psychology of those individuals who do not believe is presently unclear.

For example, some of my earlier research indicated that some people who stated explicitly that the soul, or conscious personality, of a person ceases to exist upon biological death nevertheless continued to endorse statements that implied the psychological functioning of a dead character (Bering, 2002b). When asked if a man who had just died instantaneously in a car accident would “know that he was dead,” for instance, many participants who did not believe in the afterlife answered in the affirmative, apparently unaware of the contradiction between their beliefs and their reasoning (i.e., if the mind is snuffed out by death, of course, having knowledge of one’s own death is logically impossible). Furthermore, “cognitive effort” in this case was operationalized in terms of latency of response to deny such psychological functioning to the dead agent, and these more sensitive measures too betrayed the difficulty that nonbelievers faced in fully committing to their explicit materialist philosophy about life and death.

In a more recent study (Heywood and Bering, unpublished manuscript), self-described British and American atheists were asked a series of quasi-structured interview questions about their own major life events as part of an alleged (i.e., cover) study on autobiographical memory. Many of these individuals’ answers revealed an implicit attribution of teleo-functional, fatalistic purpose to these “turning points” in their lives. A typical example of the atheist’s reasoning in this manner is shown in a response given by a British undergraduate student of quasi-structured interview questions about their own major life events as part of an alleged (i.e., cover) study on autobiographical memory. Even if culture does serve to shape representational processes, relying on survey reports as a measure of such causal influences would be at best unwise, given that there can be any number of reasons why self-reports fail to align with implicit or even explicit thinking. This is especially the case when one is investigating the cognitive bases of religion, since due to the very same heated, secularized sociopolitical conditions that the authors discuss in the first half of their article, admitting that one is vulnerable to superstitious or quasi-religious thinking is for many people unpalatable (Preston and Epley, 2009). In fact, is it altogether possible that some self-classified atheists are in many respects more “religious” than self-classified religious people.

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Other atheists in the study confessed that they sometimes caught themselves thinking in such a fashion too, but immediately corrected this cognitive bias in light of their explicitly logical, religious beliefs. One such person was a middle-aged man who botched a job interview for a position that he very much wanted, failing to get an offer from his prospective employer: “And I found myself thinking, ‘maybe this is meant to happen so I can find a better job or move to a different county to work—something like that.’ But in reality I don’t believe in fate, so it’s strange to find oneself thinking like that.” This pattern of thinking strongly implies that atheism is more a verbal muzzling of God—a conscious, executively made decision to reject one’s own intuitions about a faceless über-mind involved in our personal...
affairs—than it is a true cognitive exorcism. The thought might be smothered so quickly that we fail to even realize that it has happened, but the despondent atheist’s appeal to some reasonable mind seems a psychological reflex to misfortune nonetheless. In sum, Geertz and Markússon have raised many important questions in their critique of the cognitive science of religion, particularly with respect to the naturalness hypothesis. However, “atheism” as a sociopolitical construct and an increasingly popular brand of personal identity is a very far cry from the sort of unique, culturally-scripted, atheistic cognition that the authors postulate.

References
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