

‘IMPLANTED IN US BY NATURE’: THE COGNITIVE SCIENCE OF RELIGION AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR THEOLOGY

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Abstract: The Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) holds that religion emerges from human cognition and its intuitions. Hence, it describes religion as a ‘natural’ belief in ‘supernatural agents’. Traditional theology also maintained that there is an ‘innate’ or ‘implanted’ knowledge of God or gods. It will be argued that CSR and theology can be related, yet not in a straightforward manner. After sketching out in what sense CSR calls religion ‘natural’ and how it describes ‘supernatural agents’, this article explores some examples of the traditional theological doctrine of an ‘implanted’ knowledge of God. It shows that the reliability of such an ‘implanted’ knowledge of God was disputed among theologians and, even if it was affirmed, had an ambiguous position in theology. This also applies to CSR if it is to be related to the traditional theological doctrine. There are illuminating convergences between CSR and theology but also considerable divergences. Both, however, prove significant for theology.

I. INTRODUCTION

‘For as long as history has been with us, religion has been a feature of human life. There is no known culture for which we have an ethnographic or an archaeological record that does not have some form of religion.’¹ From the perspective of modern science, religion seems to be a human universal. One of the sciences dealing with this human feature is the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR). It emerged during the 1990s when scientists from various disciplines started explaining religious beliefs and activities from human cognition. According to CSR, this not only accounts for the universal prevalence of religion. More significantly, the structure of human cognition appears to prevent an infinite variability of religious phenomena and rather leads to certain recurring features.² CSR understands religion as emerging from cognition and hence calls it ‘natural’.

However, the universality of religion was noticed previously. Very early on, philosophy and theology considered the observation that apparently everywhere humans worshipped invisible, divine beings. Some attributed the ubiquitous presence of such beliefs to human ‘nature’: they were deemed to be ‘implanted’ or ‘innate’ and hence ‘natural’.

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¹Robin Dunbar, *How Religion Evolved: And Why It Endures* (London: Pelican, 2022), xi.

²Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors* (London: Vintage, 2002), 3–5; Justin L. Barrett and Jonathan A. Lanman, ‘The Science of Religious Beliefs’, *Religion* 38, no. 2 (2008): 109–24, 110, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.religion.2008.01.007>.

Is it possible to relate these different approaches? And if yes, what does the scientific research mean for the traditional understanding, particularly in theology?

I will start by sketching out CSR's research for those who are not familiar with it. I will then show how particularly theology described the 'innate' knowledge of God. And finally, I will ask how theology could accommodate CSR's research and what it would mean for the theological doctrine of an 'implanted' knowledge of God.

II. CSR AND THE NATURALNESS OF RELIGION

CSR explores the cognitive foundations of religious beliefs. The different accounts are centred around personal beings which cannot be observed as part of empirical nature. Therefore, they are most often called 'supernatural agents'. They are seen as an essential component of religion. Following Daniel Dennett, religions are 'social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought'. Scott Atran calls supernatural agents 'critical components of all religions'.³ According to CSR, the belief in such supernatural agents is a natural occurrence. But what exactly does 'natural' mean? And how does CSR describe those 'supernatural agents'?

Natural

Robert McCauley explains in what sense religion is understood to be natural. He compares religion with other features that humans develop during early childhood. Since the emergence of those features is due to human maturation, McCauley talks of 'maturationally naturalness'. He ascribes it to activities such as chewing or walking—activities every child normally learns, independently of culture and assistance by others. Neither specific cultural tools nor focused, conscious learning are necessary for them. Most emerge during the first two years of life and all of them are universal. Those maturationally natural features also include cognition and knowledge. Developing language is, for instance, a maturationally cognitive skill—even if it is subject to 'cultural infiltration' which determines the specific language an infant acquires.⁴

McCauley sets this maturationally naturalness apart from the so-called 'practised naturalness', which is dependent on human culture. He assigns practiced naturalness to activities, such as writing or riding a bike. They do not only require conscious, focused, and deliberate learning, but they also involve artefacts, such as a pen or a bike. Many are acquired between the ages of

³Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (London: Penguin, 2007), 9, cf. 11–12; Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 15, cf. 4, 9, 57. The term 'supernatural agents' is widely established in CSR despite the occasional criticism e.g., Justin L. Barrett, *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology* (West Conshohocken: Templeton, 2011), 97. The view of religion as a relation to a supernatural agent is often called 'Tylorian', following Edward Burnett Tylor who regarded the 'belief in Spiritual Beings' 'as a minimum definition of Religion' in *Primitive Culture*, vol. I (London: Murray, 1871), 383. Claire White, 'What does the Cognitive Science of Religion Explain?', in *New Developments in the Cognitive Science of Religion*, ed. Hans van Eyghen (Cham: Springer, 2018), 44 n. 4, has cautioned that this focus on supernatural beings 'may be interpreted as a Tylorian minimalist view of religion'. As CSR does not cling to a strict definition of religion, the classification of beliefs as 'religious' which are not related to such 'supernatural agents' is well possible.

⁴Robert N. McCauley, *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 25–26.

five and seven. They become so automatic that they are practised 'naturally', *i.e.*, rather intuitive, without much effort or consciousness.⁵

McCauley argues that religion arises 'naturally' in the sense of maturational naturalness. In his view, religion originates from cognitive processes that are not culturally imparted or learned.⁶ So when scholars of CSR call religion 'natural' this is to be understood in exactly that sense. In fact, the basic assumption that stimulated the emergence of CSR was the rejection of culture as an explanation of the most essential traits of religion.⁷ If religion does not originate from culture is it then 'innate' as some theologians assumed?

Does natural mean innate?

The concept of innateness is highly debated. Paul E. Griffiths dubbed it a pre-scientific thought.⁸ The popular understanding is a vague assumption of genetic causation with the exclusion of other ways, such as learning or environmental stimuli. However, many traits of a biological species which would commonly be regarded as natural are not or not only caused by genetic determination: song patterns of some birds are the outcome of genetic programming and learning; the sex of certain reptiles depends on the temperature the egg is exposed to; some universally occurring social skills of rhesus macaques develop only due to reliably-given social interaction during infancy.⁹ The development of traits is a complex combination of genetic determination and environmental stimuli. Critics of the innateness concept point out that it conflates different causes, such as: not learned, independent of a species' adaptive plasticity, genetically determined, selected by evolution, universally occurring within a species, insensitive to variation by environmental stimuli, *etc.*¹⁰

McCauley himself leaves the question rather open. He stresses that, although 'being innate would be a sufficient condition, ... it is not a necessary one for establishing some cognitive pattern's maturational naturalness'.¹¹ Fundamental and therefore reliably occurring conditions (like the need for food or physical properties of things) can also be responsible for the universality of cognitive traits. Calling religion innate does not clarify much because of the term's lack of conceptual clarity. Scholars of CSR regard the question as to whether religion is 'innate' or 'in the genes' as 'meaningless'.¹²

⁵McCauley, *Why Religion is Natural*, 20–25.

⁶McCauley, *Why Religion is Natural*, esp. 108–58.

⁷White, 'What does the Cognitive Science of Religion Explain?', 35–36; Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 3–5.

⁸Paul. E. Griffiths, 'What is Innateness', *The Monist* 85, no. 1 (2002): 70–85, 72, <https://doi.org/10.5840/monist20028518>.

⁹Griffiths, 'What is Innateness', 74–5; Matteo Mameli and Patrick Bateson, 'An Evaluation of the Concept of Innateness', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 366 (2011): 436–43, 437–38, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2010.0174>.

¹⁰Mameli and Bateson, 'An Evaluation of the Concept of Innateness', 440.

¹¹McCauley, *Why Religion is Natural*, 74.

¹²Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 4–5; Justin L. Barrett, 'On the Naturalness of Religion and Religious Freedom', in *Homo Religiosus? Exploring the Roots of Religious Freedom in Human Experience*, ed. Timothy Samuel Shah and Jack Friedman (Cambridge: CUP, 2018), 68–69.

Natural as related to naturally developed cognitive capacities

What we can learn from this discussion is that religion does not necessarily need to be innate in the sense of genetically inherited to be characterised as ‘natural’. Rather, researchers of CSR suggest explaining religious ideas and behaviours from cognitive capacities which arise in the sense of McCauley’s maturational naturalness.¹³ Religious beliefs rely on ordinary cognitive processes: the ability to attribute emotional states, beliefs, and motivations to others; the capacity to detect agency as the origin of occurrences; intuitions about basic biological, psychological, and physical facts in the world—just to name a few. According to Pascal Boyer, religious beliefs are formed in the same way as other ‘cultural concepts’: they are ‘built’ through a chain of intuitions and unconscious inferences ‘because the way our brains are put together makes it very difficult not to build them’.¹⁴ In this sense, religion is called ‘natural’.

To be clear, this does not mean human cognition produces a specific idea or concept of supernatural beings. Rather, the ordinary cognitive processes prepare an individual to accept certain ideas of extraordinary agents, which are present in a specific region or culture, and connect some of their intuitions with them. According to Boyer, the origin of such ideas may be the cognitive handling of recently deceased people. Cognition seems to continue producing intuitions about the person which conflict with intuitions about their dead body.¹⁵ This may explain the widespread ancestor cults. However, potential candidates of extraordinary beings to which some intuitions become attached could also be inanimate objects, spirits, a range of gods in polytheistic settings, or a monotheistic god. The regularity of supernatural beings is not so much based on the candidates but rather on the intuitions which are related to them. Human cognition includes a limited number of intuitions and dispositions, and this seems to be what determines the recurring features of supernatural agents. Therefore, even if cognition does not produce clear concepts of supernatural agents, it requires certain recurring features for those agents to be accepted and successfully transmitted within a social group or culture. These recurring features make up the ‘natural’ knowledge of supernatural agents, as CSR describes it.

The natural knowledge of supernatural agents

Justin L. Barrett provides an account of features essential to the natural representations of gods: ‘God concepts must be (1) counterintuitive, (2) an intentional agent, (3) possessing strategic information, (4) able to act in the human world in detectable ways and (5) capable of motivating behaviours that reinforce belief.’¹⁶ What does he mean by this?¹⁷

¹³White, ‘What does the Cognitive Science of Religion Explain?’, 40–42.

¹⁴Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 187.

¹⁵Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 251–61.

¹⁶Justin L. Barrett, ‘Why Santa Claus is Not a God’, *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 8, no. 1–2 (2008): 149–161, 150, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156770908X289251>.

¹⁷This article can only provide a very rough sketch of CSR’s research. It refers to the so-called ‘Standard Model of CSR’ to provide an overview. This virtue of the Standard Model is at the same time its curse. By sketching out the basic and most commonly agreed elements of CSR in a systematic structure it disguises the actual depth, diversity, and the controversies within this research. Therefore, I will at least point to further discussions where possible. Concise descriptions of the Standard Model are provided, for instance, by Barrett, ‘Naturalness’, 75–83 and Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 375–77.

The first feature is a crucial element of being 'supernatural'. Psychological studies have shown that human cognition relies on certain mental templates that provide intuitive expectations about an object. Those templates are part of a so-called 'intuitive ontology'¹⁸, which sorts objects into specific categories or, as Barrett prefers, 'sets of expectations'¹⁹, such as '(human) person', 'animal', 'plant', and (solid) 'object'. Recognising an object's ontological categories triggers unconscious expectations about its properties and behaviour. We intuitively know that plants will not move away or that other humans will answer questions whereas a stone will not. Boyer argues that concepts of supernatural agents violate those intuitions, for example, a mountain that demands food or an animal that talks. That means supernatural agents are 'intuitively unnatural' or 'counterintuitive'.²⁰ The degree of counterintuitiveness is variable. Some scholars stress that religious ideas violate the intuitive ontology only minimally. This seems to enhance the memorability of a belief and hence its stability whereas a too great violation requires too much cognitive effort. Hence, they are called 'minimal counterintuitive' (MCI).²¹ This concept aims to explain why certain ideas are more likely to be present and transmitted than others. However, some serious objections have been raised against this view.²² There is, for instance, an ongoing discussion as to whether other factors such as culture or emotional valence are more relevant for the prevalence of religious ideas than the violation of intuitive ontology.²³ But this does not question the idea that the violation of intuitive expectations is an essential feature of 'supernatural' beings.

The second property, an 'intentional agent' links the idea of gods with the 'person' category from intuitive ontology. This adds a lot of properties. As to any other person, we intuitively attribute, for instance, the ability to listen and to understand, feelings, and intentions to gods. This so-called intuitive or folk psychology is very powerful. It provides a subject with a lot of intuitive assumptions which guide their interaction with another person. The application of the 'person' category may be partly responsible for the widespread anthropomorphism in representations of gods. Christian, Jewish, and Islamic theology teach that God is radically different and hence not subject to the constraints of time and space. However, as Barrett and Frank C. Keil have shown in a series of empirical studies, even people who adhere to the official doctrine tend to treat God as if God had human agency when they have to make quick judgements in real-life scenarios. The underlying intuitive ontologies are

¹⁸Intuitive ontology consists of subdivisions which are often called 'folk biology', 'folk mechanics' or 'folk physics', and 'folk psychology'.

¹⁹Barrett, *Cognitive Science*, 62.

²⁰Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 35–36; Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 82–87. Atran, *In Gods We Trust*, e.g., 13 calls them 'counterfactual' but means the same.

²¹Justin L. Barrett, 'Exploring the Natural Foundations of Religion', *Trends in Cognitive Science* 4, no. 9 (2000): 29–34, 30–31, [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1364-6613\(99\)01419-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1364-6613(99)01419-9).

²²Benjamin Grant Purzycki and Aiyana K. Willard, 'MCI Theory: A Critical Discussion', *Religion, Brain and Behavior* 6, no. 3 (2016): 207–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2015.1024915>.

²³Michaela Porubanova and John H. Shaver, 'Minimal Counterintuitiveness Revisited, Again: The Role of Emotional Valence in Memory for Conceptual Incongruity', in *Religion Explained?: The Cognitive Science of Religion after Twenty-Five Years*, ed. Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 123–32.

faster in providing assumptions than sophisticated and mentally demanding theological concepts.²⁴ The view that an anthropomorphic understanding of god(s) originates from implicit cognitive processes that develop early in childhood, in contrast to an elaborated, 'theologically correct' understanding of God, has been confirmed by many empirical studies.²⁵ The intuitive feature of 'intentional agency' makes it possible to interact with a god as a person yet this intuitive 'person' category also implicitly adds anthropomorphic properties, which may be partly at odds with the explicitly elaborated concepts of a religion. However, other studies suggest that God is not represented as a 'normal' person. God is a special person in that God has a mind yet without, or with a rather particular kind of, body.²⁶

The third feature CSR attributes to natural representations of God is 'strategic information'. Theologies of the Abrahamic religions teach the omniscience of God. However, it is not simply any knowledge that makes gods relevant. So-called 'Aquinas Agents', who know 'every single fact about the world', may be powerful, but their representation is too complex and hence cognitively too costly.²⁷ Furthermore, in everyday life, it would not be relevant that a god knew, for example, 'the contents of every refrigerator in the world'.²⁸ Relevance in ordinary life is related to social interaction. Therefore, gods who have access to information about a person's material position, intentions in cooperation, and honesty are highly relevant. Such gods can be 'useful allies or dangerous enemies', depending on a person's social behaviour and their compliance with what is regarded as moral in their respective societies.²⁹

Therefore, a god must be able to exert 'detectable action' in the world as a fourth feature. Barrett has suggested that humans are biased to detect intentional agency behind events in their environment. He has called this tendency the 'hypersensitive agency detection device' (HADD). It developed, he assumes, in times when identifying predators or prey was crucial for human survival. It was far more advantageous to suspect intentional agency (such as predators, enemies, or prey) than unintentional entities (such as the wind) as a reason for a noise in the environment.³⁰ Ideas of gods have a high potential to be 'remembered and transmitted' if they are 'potentially satisfying' origins of events that cannot be explained otherwise.³¹ They indicate

²⁴Justin L. Barrett and Frank C. Keil, 'Conceptualizing a Nonnatural Entity: Anthropomorphism in God Concepts', *Cognitive Psychology* 31, no. 3 (1996): 219–247, 240–45, <https://doi.org/10.1006/cogp.1996.0017>; Barrett, *Cognitive Science*, 134–38.

²⁵Larisa Heiphetz, Jonathan D. Lane, and Liane L. Young, 'How Children and Adults Represent God's Mind', *Cognitive Science* 40, no. 1 (2016): 121–44, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cogs.12232>.

²⁶Andrew Shtulman and Marjaana Lindeman, 'Attributes of God: Conceptual Foundations of a Foundational Belief', *Cognitive Science* 40, no. 3 (2016): 635–670, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cogs.12253>; K. Mitch Hodge and Paulo Sousa, 'Dualism, Disembodiment and the Divine: Supernatural Agent Representations in CSR', in *Evolution, Cognition, and the History of Religion: A New Synthesis*, ed. Anders Klostergaard Petersen (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 309–21.

²⁷Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 188.

²⁸Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 180.

²⁹Barrett, 'Santa Claus', 152–53; see also Benjamin G. Purzycki et al., 'What Does God Know? Supernatural Agents' Access to Socially Strategic and Non-Strategic Information', *Cognitive Science* 36, no. 5 (2012): 846–69, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1551-6709.2012.01242.x>

³⁰Barrett, *Cognitive Science*, 100–01; cf. Barrett, 'Exploring', 31–32; Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 164–69.

³¹Barrett, 'Santa Claus', 153.

that gods have the power to influence happenings and that they are traceable. Another instance is the occurrence of fortune and misfortune, which can be interpreted as a reward or punishment from 'morally interested' deities.³²

All the aforementioned features enable a divine agent, as the fifth feature, to 'motivate behaviours that reinforce belief'. People engage in a variety of religious practices, such as rituals, worship, prayer, and sacrifice. If, in the aftermath of specific practices, certain events occurred which were intended by those practices, this may be seen as confirmation not only of a god's existence but, more importantly, of their power. The intended effects are, in Barrett's examples, to avoid a deity's punishment, seek divine reward, or propitiate a god to increase one's prosperity and social success. Another aspect may underpin this: humans treat gods intuitively as 'exchange partners'. Boyer points out that misfortune is 'generally interpreted in social terms' because the mental capacities for social life are the most developed and sophisticated in humans. Those capacities are also applied to ancestors, which some scholars regard as the origins of god concepts. Ancestors provide protection and in exchange receive sacrifices. Therefore, the relationship with ancestors is represented in cognitive mechanisms for social exchange. Misfortune might be considered as caused by angered ancestors who now enforce a fair deal in exchange for their protection. As mentioned, humans tend to regard intentional agency as a reason for occurrences which affect them. Along with the continuous action of the cognitive processes that deal with social interaction, this mental mechanism provides intuitions that there must be an intentional agent who is responsible for a concrete misfortune. 'Potential candidates' for this are all partners a subject deals with, 'neighbours, relatives and envious partners', but all the more ghosts, ancestors, and gods who are already represented as involved in social interaction owing to their strategic knowledge. This implies not only that supernatural agents can be a 'source of danger'. Owing to their involvement in social interaction, they can also be perceived as mighty 'protectors'.³³ The intuitive treatment of gods as exchange partners can explain the fear of God's punishment for the violation of moral laws and why sacrifices, rituals, worship, or morally good behaviour are regarded as a human debt in exchange for God's protection and reward.³⁴

III. THE THEOLOGICAL DOCTRINE

Long before CSR, as mentioned at the beginning, philosophy and theology reflected on the observation that the belief in god(s) seemed to be universal and hence 'natural'. At the outset of his *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, John of Damascus points out that 'the knowledge that God is, is naturally implanted in all by him'.³⁵ When God made humanity, God

³²Barrett, 'Santa Claus', 108.

³³Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 226–30; cf. Todd Tremlin, *Minds and Gods: the Cognitive Foundations of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 113–30.

³⁴Lee A. Kirkpatrick, *Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion* (New York: Guilford, 2005), 253–56, 339–40.

³⁵John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* [EF] 1 [I.1], cf. 3 [I.3].

‘implanted’ in human nature everything that makes it human, such as body and soul³⁶—unlike sin, which is ‘not natural’ and ‘not implanted’.³⁷ For the Damascene, ‘nature’ denotes the essence of a thing as realised in a species or an individual.³⁸ So, when the Damascene calls the knowledge of God ‘implanted naturally’ he considers it to be part of the human essence. Most of the theological tradition discussed here follows this Aristotelian understanding of ‘nature’ and ‘natural’.

John was not the first to refer to an ‘implanted’ idea of God. The Stoa, for instance, advocates the existence of ‘common concepts’ or ‘implanted preconceptions’, which include the belief in gods.³⁹ And Tertullian famously speaks of a ‘naturally Christian soul’.⁴⁰ Later, some medieval theologians connect the innate knowledge of God with the notion of a natural law according to Rom. 2:15. William of Auxerre, for example, explains ‘how the natural law is inscribed on the human heart’. He points out that already children know that criminals are to be punished, and friends and benefactors are to be loved. He quotes Augustine who holds that the soul, as the image of God, by seeing itself sees God, and that the soul delights when it sees in itself God. The delight, William argues, does not come from seeing the abstract divine essence: ‘it is the good the perception of which is delight’. Hence the soul, seeing in itself the ‘primary bounty’ of the ‘supreme good’, understands that the latter ‘supremely hates the evil and hence punishes it’. Thus, the soul sees in itself the primary justice and derives from this all the other attributions predicated to God.⁴¹ In Scholasticism, the innate knowledge of the natural law is called *synderesis*. It denotes the remnants of an original knowledge of good and evil which were preserved after the fall. William explains that since *synderesis* is ‘the true image of God, it sees in itself God, in whom it sees the true justice, the true gentleness’. It never sins, because it sees the natural law, ‘what it shall do and what it shall not do’.⁴²

Natural law and *synderesis* also lead the theologians of the Lutheran Reformation to assume a basic natural knowledge of God. In his early *Lectures on Romans*, Luther argues that Paul in Rom. 1:19 speaks of the ‘natural knowledge’ of God. The idolaters, even though their veneration is false, testify to this knowledge because ‘all those who put up idols and worshipped them and called them gods or God ... show with certainty that they have the knowledge of the divine in their heart’. This is ‘without doubt in them from God’. Like William, Luther calls this true knowledge a ‘theological *synderesis*’. The heathens’ fault is that they distort it and turn it into the veneration of idols.⁴³ So for Luther, the natural knowledge of God emerges from an awareness of the duty of worship as part of a natural, innate

³⁶EF 50 [III.6].

³⁷EF 64 [III.20].

³⁸EF 55 [III.11]; Johannes Zachhuber, *The Rise of Christian Theology and the End of Ancient Metaphysics: Patristic Philosophy from the Cappadocian Fathers to John of Damascus* (Oxford: OUP, 2020), 303–05.

³⁹E.g., Epictetus, *Dissertationes [Discourses]*, I.22.1 and I.22.10.

⁴⁰Tertullian, *Apologeticus [Apol.]*, 17.6.

⁴¹William of Auxerre [Guillermus Altissiodorensis], *Summa aurea in quattuor libros sententiarum* (Paris: Philippe Pigouchet, 1500), III.7.1 q. 4, fol. 154v.

⁴²William of Auxerre [Guillermus Altissiodorensis], *Summa aurea*, II.12 Q. 1, fol. 65v–66r; Odon Lottin, *Le Droit Naturel chez Saint Thomas d’Aquin et ses prédécesseurs*, 2nd ed. (Bruges: Beyaert, 1931), 34–35.

⁴³Martin Luther, *Weimarer Ausgabe [WA]* 56, 176–77.

morality. In his *Lectures on Genesis*, he calls this awareness the 'law of nature which says: Call upon or worship God'.⁴⁴

Calvin assumes an innate 'sense of the divinity' (*sensus divinitatis*). He puts 'beyond controversy' that there is 'present in the human mind, and in fact by natural instinct, some sense of the divinity'.⁴⁵ He stresses that it is 'naturally engendered in all ... and inwardly fixed, as it were, in their marrows' and not something which 'is first to be learned at school, but of which everyone is their own master from the womb and which nature itself never allows to be forgotten'.⁴⁶

Lutheran Orthodoxy developed the classical doctrine of the *notitia Dei naturalis insita*. Johann Gerhard combines the Stoic notion of innate 'common principles' and the Scholastic *synderesis* to elucidate that the knowledge of God is:

from the womb engraved and impressed on every human soul, namely from those principles, which are born with us, or 'common principles' (which are nothing else than some relics and debris of the divine image, sparks and little flames of that clear light, which gleamed with full splendour in the human mind before the fall) ... namely that God is one, good ...⁴⁷

Johannes Quenstedt writes that a person 'knows God without consideration and operation of the mind' and 'nobody, not even children, lacks it'.⁴⁸ This and the short overview of the 'implanted' knowledge of God in theology show that the doctrine not only refers to the same phenomenon as CSR, but also that its reflections sometimes come very close to CSR's descriptions.

However, early modernity saw a steady decline of this view. Locke, for instance, rejected any 'innate Principles', including the idea of God.⁴⁹ In the nineteenth century, in the aftermath of Kantian philosophy and owing to the rise of modern science, naturalism, and atheism, the doctrine of the innate knowledge of God also corroded in theology. Protestant theologians in the early twentieth century argue that humanity, owing to its sinfulness, is incapable of any knowledge of God. While Rudolf Bultmann concedes that humans can at least ask for God, yet without gaining any knowledge, Karl Barth stresses that humanity has 'completely lost the capacity for God' through the fall, even the 'possibility of enquiring about God'.⁵⁰ This view becomes so widespread that even theologians outside of this tradi-

⁴⁴WA 44, 84.

⁴⁵John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Inst.], I.3.1.

⁴⁶Inst. I.3.3.

⁴⁷Johann Gerhard, *Loci theologici*, vol. 1, ed. Eduard Preuss (Berlin: Schlawitz, [1610] 1863), loc. II, cap. 4, art. 7, §60, 268.

⁴⁸Johannes Quenstedt, *Theologia didactico-polemica sive systema theologicum*, vol. 1 (Witteberga: Quenstedt and Schumacher, 1685), Pars I, cap. VI, sec. I, Θέσις XI, 253.

⁴⁹John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, [1690] 1975), I.4, §§8–16, 87–95.

⁵⁰Rudolf Bultmann, *Essays: Philosophical and Theological* (London: SCM, 1955), 94; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2nd ed., vol. I/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 238–39.

tion reduce the natural knowledge of God to an awareness of a mystery or an ‘unthematic knowledge’.⁵¹

IV. THEOLOGY AND CSR

There have been attempts to relate CSR and philosophy or theology. Adam Green stresses the practical nature of CSR’s intuitive religion yet questionably connects it with the highly theoretical endeavour of ‘natural theology’ by attempting to ‘reshape’ it from CSR’s insights.⁵² Kelly Clark and Justin Barrett refer to Calvin’s *sensus divinitatis*, which has the difficulty, as we will see, that Calvin effectively denies any true knowledge from this intuitive sense.⁵³ Jonathan Jong, Christopher Kavanagh, and Aku Visala reject any relevance of CSR for ‘classical theism’.⁵⁴ At least in theology, this seems to be unlikely, owing to the observed similarities between the doctrine of the ‘implanted knowledge of God’ and CSR’s insights into intuitive religion. However, it is indeed important to acknowledge the difference between CSR’s intuitive beliefs and the elaborated doctrines of God in theology.

Already Tertullian differentiates the natural predisposition of the soul from Christian faith. In addition to the soul’s inborn knowledge, God provided Scripture, which enables us to ‘approach’ God and God’s commandments ‘more fully and more impressively’.⁵⁵ The natural knowledge does not ensure the full benefits of the Christian faith. Even less optimistic about the innate knowledge is Aquinas. Discussing John of Damascus’s view he concedes that the knowledge of God’s existence is ‘implanted in us by nature’. But, he objects, this is only ‘in a general sense, with some confusion’. It is present in humanity’s natural striving for happiness, which includes a certain idea of that happiness. However, many fail to seek happiness in God as their highest good and direct it to earthly goods and pleasures. Therefore, he cautions, this is ‘not actually knowing that God exists’.⁵⁶

The Reformers follow other Scholastic traditions, such as William of Auxerre. According to them, as shown above, the innate awareness of a divine being relates to natural morality. Hence, Melancthon treats this innate knowledge in his locus ‘On the Law’, the task of which is to ‘show the sin’ and, without the gospel, only leads to conviction and death of humanity.⁵⁷ Likewise, Luther explains that without knowledge of the gospel, humans can know God as

⁵¹Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 2015), 21–23, 34–35; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 114–17.

⁵²Adam Green, ‘Cognitive Science and the Natural Knowledge of God’, *The Monist* 96, no. 3 (2013): 399–419, 405–10, <https://doi.org/10.5840/monist201396318>.

⁵³Kelly James Clark and Justin L. Barrett, ‘Reformed Epistemology and the Cognitive Science of Religion’, *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 27, no. 2 (2010): 174–89, <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil201027216>.

⁵⁴Jonathan Jong, Christopher Kavanagh, and Aku Visala, ‘Born Idolaters: The Limits of the Philosophical Implications of the Cognitive Science of Religion’, *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 57, no. 2 (2015): 244–66, <https://doi.org/10.1515/nzsth-2015-0012>.

⁵⁵*Apol.* 18.1.

⁵⁶Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I q.2 a.1 ad.1; cf. I-II q.109 a.3 co.

⁵⁷Philipp Melancthon, ‘Loci communes’, in *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Henricus Ernestus Bindseil, *Corpus Reformatorum* (Brunsviga: Schwetschke, [1521] 1854), 139–40.

creator, lawmaker, and judge—not God's love, desire for salvation, and forgiveness.⁵⁸ Luther expressly denies that natural morality leads to the salvific knowledge of God: 'But it is not the proper knowledge of God that happens through the law, be it Moses' or the one implanted in our nature ... The other knowledge happens through the gospel ... which is called the knowledge of grace and truth, the evangelical knowledge of God.'⁵⁹

Calvin, even though he advocates a *sensus divinitatis*, is not very confident about the actual state of this knowledge. It could provide the knowledge that God exists, that God is the creator of all and a 'father' who governs and sustains his creation – 'had Adam stood upright'.⁶⁰ But although the 'seed of the divine religion' is 'implanted in all', it does not 'mature' and 'bring fruit in its time'.⁶¹ The general human depravation suppresses the realisation of such knowledge. Humans are 'by nature disposed to hypocrisy',⁶² suffer from 'depravity of the mind',⁶³ and everything in and around them is 'stained with very great indecency'.⁶⁴ Therefore, the *sensus divinitatis* only leads to 'superstition' and 'vain speculation'.⁶⁵ And even without such depravation, Calvin still differentiates this 'first and plain knowledge' from the belief in 'God as a Redeemer in Christ'.⁶⁶

So, even though theology suggests an innate knowledge of God, the confidence in it is rather mixed. It ranges from 'confusion' and unrealised potential to the (true) knowledge of God as creator, lawmaker, and judge. In all cases, it cannot reach what Luther called the 'proper', 'evangelical' knowledge of God. The innate knowledge, therefore, has a dialectical relation with the Christian faith. Now, this is relevant to the question as to how to accommodate CSR in theology. As indicated above, the theological doctrine and CSR appear to deal, in their own distinct ways, with the same phenomenon, *i.e.*, the observation that religion seems to be a human universal. Therefore, we can consider CSR as a modern, scientific investigation of what traditional theology included in its reflection and systematic as the 'implanted knowledge of God'. If we accept this, the dialectic with which traditional theology has accommodated the 'implanted' knowledge also applies to the accommodation of CSR's investigations of the same phenomenon. Thus, CSR's intuitive religious beliefs will have some importance for theology yet are at the same time to be distinguished from Christian faith. The distinction is also confirmed by CSR itself, insofar as it contrasts the intuitive beliefs and the 'official doctrine' or the 'theology' of the religious traditions.⁶⁷ Connected with the traditional doctrine of the innate knowledge, CSR's intuitive religion shows convergences and divergences with the Christian faith which are both, however, relevant to theology.

⁵⁸WA 40/I, 607.

⁵⁹WA 46, 668–69.

⁶⁰*Inst.* I.2.1.

⁶¹*Inst.* I.4.1.

⁶²*Inst.* I.1.2.

⁶³*Inst.* I.2.3.

⁶⁴*Inst.* I.1.2.

⁶⁵*Inst.* I.4.1.

⁶⁶*Inst.* I.2.1.

⁶⁷*E.g.*, McCauley, *Why Religion is Natural*, 211–13; Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 303–27; Barrett and Lanman, 'The Science of Religious Beliefs', 119–21.

Convergences

From a hermeneutical perspective, it appears to be difficult to reject any relation between CSR's intuitive religious ideas and the Christian understanding of God. Even though the Protestant theology of the twentieth century denied any relevance of the 'natural' knowledge of God for the Christian faith, Bultmann, as a scholar of New Testament, was highly aware of the hermeneutical problem. He stresses that every understanding requires a 'pre-understanding'. Understanding is the integration of new into existing information. The fact that the 'Christian proclamation' can be generally understood points, according to Bultmann, to a 'pre-understanding' which he calls 'natural theology'. Bultmann argues that this is not a proper knowledge of God, but rather 'humanity's knowledge of itself', an awareness of the human situation, which exposes the want of God. The divine traits reveal, in truth, human deficiencies and struggles: divine omnipotence indicates the awareness of being submitted to an enigma and overwhelming power, divine holiness the demand of the moment and ethical responsibility, divine eternity the limitedness and nothingness of life. Hence Bultmann argues that 'natural theology' contains no real knowledge but only the 'question for God'. The latter contains a 'concept of God', but this is not a positive knowledge. Rather the insight into what humanity lacks produces a notion which is a negative idea of God, like a mould without contents. Christian faith has to uncover and clarify it.⁶⁸ This is the 'pre-understanding' that any understanding of the Christian idea of God requires. So even for Bultmann, the 'natural' and the Christian knowledge of God are related in a complex way, which is necessary for the comprehensibility of the Christian faith.

This means that the universal comprehensibility of the word 'god' points to a 'pre-understanding' of it. CSR and classical theology meet in the suggestion that this understanding at least partly emerges naturally. And, unlike Bultmann, both grant some positive content to it. Strikingly, there is a high convergence between CSR's 'supernatural agents' and the innate knowledge of God in classical theology. While CSR speaks of supernatural, counterintuitive, and intentional agents, theology assumes that people naturally know of divine beings which transcend the world of natural laws and can be addressed as personal beings. The strategic information and detectable power of those supernatural agents, which makes them 'exchange partners', equals the innate knowledge of God as the creator, law-maker, and judge, and the latter presupposes the ability to have some insight into the moral behaviour of humans. Finally, the rituals, which CSR regards as behaviours which are motivated by belief and enforce it, correspond to the observation in traditional theology that all people know the duty to venerate God, even if they fail the true God by worshipping idols.

Now, as the old theologians stress, this 'innate' knowledge is true—but partly distorted and certainly not sufficient. It needs to be expanded, complemented, and transformed by the revealed knowledge of God. But this still assumes a partial continuity between innate knowledge and the Christian idea of God. This must also be applied to CSR's significance for theology. CSR has shown that beliefs which are directly connected with human intuition are strong and provide not only comprehensibility but also a high degree of plausibility and stability to religious ideas. Boyer has stressed that the closer religious ideas match the intuitive expectations produced by our 'mental templates', the more effortlessly those beliefs are held because they do not demand much cognitive activity. Barrett and Jonathan A. Lanman

⁶⁸Bultmann, *Essays*, 91–9; cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding* (London: SCM, 1969), 319–21.

have called these intuitive foundations the 'cognitive anchors' of religious ideas. Those 'anchors' ground them in the deep, hidden architecture of the human mind, its unconscious mechanisms, biases, and dispositions.⁶⁹ CSR stresses that the nature of religious belief is *not* to provide a *theoretical* explanation of the world.⁷⁰ The 'cognitive anchors' mean that religious beliefs are considerably less dependent on rational argument and reflection than often assumed because they are rooted in the intuitive, pre-reflective making sense of the world. It seems that certain convergences between CSR's religious beliefs and Christian faith are central not only for the general comprehensibility to non-Christians but also for the plausibility and stability of Christian beliefs in Christians. This must also be stressed particularly over against theological approaches which base the plausibility of the Christian faith unilaterally on rational argument.⁷¹

Divergences

Even traditional approaches which concede a high degree of reliability to the 'innate' knowledge agree that the latter is only a pre-stage of the true faith and cannot redeem humanity. It lacks insight into topics related to salvation as the most central subject of the Christian faith: the Trinity, incarnation, justification and grace, deification, and Christian eschatology. That means, as for example Luther pointed out, the natural knowledge has no understanding of God's saving will, forgiveness, and grace. Remarkably, those attributes are not part of CSR's list of divine traits either. So what precisely are the divergences between CSR's intuitive religious beliefs and Christian faith?

Several studies in CSR have indicated that there is not only a difference between the specific Christian idea of God and intuitive beliefs; more importantly, they suggest a persisting tension between them. As described above, the intuitive person-concept is not only the basis on which the concept of God is formed but also gets in the way of the Christian idea of God. Young children represent, for example, God's knowledge as that of a person, including the limitations of human knowledge. It is only later in life, at about the age of five, that the concept of divine omniscience is developed.⁷² The studies presuppose that traits, such as 'omniscience, omnipresence, and incorporeality', do not replace the intuitive beliefs. They actively deviate from them—they 'coexist' and lead to persisting conflicts and interference with the

⁶⁹Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 82–87; Barrett and Lanman, 'The Science of Religious Beliefs', 111, 119–22; cf. Graham Ward, *Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don't* (London: Tauris, 2014), 85–99.

⁷⁰E.g., Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 12–21.

⁷¹E.g., Wolfhart Pannenberg, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 3–10.

⁷²Early studies, e.g., Justin L. Barrett and Rebekah A. Richert, 'Anthropomorphism or Preparedness? Exploring Children's God Concepts', *Review of Religious Research* 44, no. 3 (2003): 300–312, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3512389>, had argued that children at the age of five represent minds in general as extraordinary and later develop an understanding of the limits of *human* minds while preserving the idea of an extraordinary mind for divine agents. However, a number of more recent studies indicate that children at the ages of three and four attribute limited minds to human persons and divine agents alike. For an overview see Heiphetz, Lane, and Young, 'How Children and Adults Represent God's Mind', esp. 128–31.

official teachings.⁷³ Obviously, when asked directly, religious individuals would produce the officially correct description of God.⁷⁴ However, it can be shown that the underlying intuitive representations of God are still active. Two studies presented suggestions about God to participants which were either ‘consistent’, *i.e.*, true or false intuitively and theologically, or ‘inconsistent’, *i.e.*, intuitively true and theologically false or vice versa. For instance, the suggestion that ‘God has beliefs that are false’ is theologically false but, according to the person-concept, intuitively true. Asked about the accuracy of those statements, participants responded significantly less correctly and more slowly in the case of inconsistent suggestions. The authors took this as evidence of the coexistence of intuitive and ‘acquired’ religious beliefs.⁷⁵ Therefore, Barrett and Lanman stress that the ‘cognitive anchors’ of religious ideas can be ‘stretched’ yet not severed.⁷⁶

So intuitive beliefs do not only support received religious beliefs but also seem to destabilise some of them.⁷⁷ It has to be said, though, that attributes such as omniscience, omnipresence, and incorporeality, which those studies usually take for typical religious beliefs,⁷⁸ are highly theoretical concepts which have their origin in theological-philosophical reasoning. Neo-Thomism underlined their theoretical nature by calling them ‘metaphysical attributes’.⁷⁹ Of course, they do describe some important characteristics of God; but it has to be noted that they

⁷³Barrett and Keil, ‘Conceptualising’, 219–47; Justin L. Barrett, ‘Theological Correctness: Cognitive Constraint and the Study of Religion’, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 11, no. 4 (1999): 325–39, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006899X00078>; Heiphetz, Lane, and Young, ‘How Children and Adults Represent God’s Mind’, 121–44; Michael Barlev, Spencer Mermelstein, and Tamsin C. German, ‘Core Intuitions About Persons Coexist and Interfere With Acquired Christian Beliefs About God’, *Cognitive Science* 41, no. S3 (2017): 425–54, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cogs.12435>; Michael Barlev, Spencer Mermelstein, and Tamsin C. German, ‘Representational coexistence in the God concept: Core knowledge intuitions of God as a person are not revised by Christian theology despite lifelong experience’, *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review* 25, no. S3 (2018): 2230–338, <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-017-1421-6>.

⁷⁴Barrett and Keil (‘Conceptualising’, 223) called this ‘theological correctness’; cf. also Barrett, ‘Theological Correctness’. To circumvent it and to uncover the unconscious representations of God, they had participants recall stories about God which contained some gaps. The expectation was that people filled those gaps unconsciously with their intuitive beliefs. Barrett and Keil saw their hypothesis confirmed, however, their stories have been criticised for being too suggestive. If stories present God as someone who pushes rocks, enjoys a smell, or helps an angel solve a crossword puzzle, participants are more or less compelled to represent God according to the person-concept. If their accounts of the stories fill the gaps with anthropomorphic traits of God, it may be down to the consistency with the narrated world of the story and not necessarily an indicator of their own beliefs; Andrew Shtulman, ‘Variation in the Anthropomorphization of Supernatural Beings and Its Implications for Cognitive Theories of Religion’, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 34, no. 5 (2008): 1123–38, 1125, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0278-7393.34.5.1123>.

⁷⁵Barlev, Mermelstein, and German, ‘Core Intuitions’, 445–50; Barlev, Mermelstein, and German, ‘Coexistence’, 2335–36.

⁷⁶Barrett and Lanman, ‘The Science of Religious Beliefs’, 119, 121.

⁷⁷Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 303–40, esp. 324–27 called this enduring deviation from official ‘doctrine’ the ‘tragedy of the theologian’. D. Jason Slone, *Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn’t* (New York: OUP, 2004), adapting Barrett and Keil’s term, called it ‘theological incorrectness’. Barrett (‘Exploring’, 30) describes the ‘simplification of concepts from the theological to the religious level’ as a ‘systematic distortion of features such that they more closely resemble intuitive ontological assumptions’.

⁷⁸Barrett and Keil, ‘Conceptualising’, 220.

⁷⁹Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, trans. William Madges (New York: Paulist, 2014), 9–10; Johannes Feiner and Magnus Löhrer, eds., *Mysterium Salutis: Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*, vol. II (Einsiedeln: Benzinger, 1967), 292–94, 296–97.

are abstract generalisations from manifold and more concrete biblical descriptions. Their degree of abstraction makes them far removed from practised faith, and it must not be overlooked that they are certainly not the epitome of the Christian idea of God. In Christian theology, Scripture, doctrine, and particularly practice (liturgy, prayer, religious education, hymns, sermons, spiritual exercises), the idea of God is significantly more anthropomorphic, personal, and concrete—without violating any Christian principles. These beliefs are more closely related to the intuitive person-concept and can therefore be expected to be more stable than the abstract philosophical-theological attributes.

Nevertheless, there are other areas which very clearly deviate from the 'natural' knowledge of God or gods and which present enduring difficulties to believers. CSR may contribute to the understanding of why this is the case. I will restrict the discussion here to two of them: the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of justification.

Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity has been causing considerable difficulties more or less from its origins in the fourth century. It is treated with reluctance in Western thought (*e.g.*, Kant, Schleiermacher, Ritschl) and it is well-known that many believers in mainstream Western Christianity struggle with it. Karl Rahner, for instance, observed that '[d]espite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere "monotheists"'.⁸⁰ Rahner has acknowledged that peculiarly the later use of the term 'person' is one of the reasons. But apparently, it is not so much the philosophical implications which cause the problem. According to CSR, the intuitive person-concept is the strongest of the intuitive ontological templates. People tend to apply it also to animals and even to inanimate objects. Scholars of CSR argue that, therefore, it is also the most common category for supernatural agents.⁸¹ Its unconscious application, especially enforced by the biblical idea of a personal God, makes it almost impossible to represent God as three 'persons'. Our cognition produces intuitions about the persons of the Trinity as three separate individuals. But three persons, according to intuitive biology, cannot make up one being. All sorts of problems result from this. Christians normally do not end up with a belief in tritheism. Usually, the divinity is mainly or entirely reserved for the Father, and his relation to Son and Spirit follows views which the Early Church branded as adoptionism, subordinationism, and modalism; or, particularly today, people represent Jesus as an exceptional human and the Spirit as an impersonal 'force'.⁸²

⁸⁰Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. J. F. Donceel (London: Burns and Oates, 1970), 10.

⁸¹Shtulman and Lindeman, 'Attributes', 636–37; Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 162.

⁸²A 2013 survey carried out by YouGov showed for instance that even Christian believers struggle with the divinity of Christ: 54% of the Anglican and 33% of the Roman-Catholic participants did not affirm the proposition that Jesus Christ was the Son of God; http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/3s35pyaa5c/YG-Archive-131125-Prospects.pdf, accessed on 9 May 2022. Another survey of the UK's 'State of Theology', carried out by Ligonier Ministries in 2018, indicated that 53% of the Protestant and 66% of the Roman Catholic participants agreed with the statement: 'There is one true God in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.' While this already shows that 47% of the Protestant and 34% of the Roman Catholic believers do openly *not* affirm the doctrine of the Trinity, the answers may well be biased by what Barrett called 'theological correctness' because a few questions later 72% of the Protestant and 77% of the Roman Catholic respondents did *not* reject the statement: 'Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God'. In regard to the third person of the Trinity, 69% of the Roman Catholic and 53% of the Protestants agreed with the statement: 'The Holy Spirit is a force but is not a personal being'. The whole survey can be accessed at <https://thestateoftheology.com/uk/>, accessed 9 May 2022.

Some approaches have avoided the person-concept for the trinitarian persons, for example, Barth's 'way of being' and Rahner's 'distinct manner of subsisting'.⁸³ However, for believers, such theoretical explanations will probably not solve the issues caused by the intuitive person-concept. The power of intuitions should be met on the same level, in an area that is closely related to intuition: that of experience. Pointing to personal experiences such as life's dynamic or the fluidity of self-experience might be more effective. Augustine employs such analogies, *e.g.*, love or the human soul. According to him, understanding the Trinity is not so much a matter of theoretical consideration but rather a spiritual task. Therefore, his aim is the transformation of the human soul into an image of the Trinity. He wants to lead the believers into participation in the trinitarian God. The more they grow into an image of the Trinity themselves, the clearer they will understand the triune God.⁸⁴ To strengthen such a trinitarian faith and ground Christian life in the life of the Trinity, it may be more effective to reserve the intuitive person category for Father, Son, and Spirit and leave the idea of God more open. This need not and must not mean more abstract. Particularly Orthodox theology has always pointed to the mystical character of God, who is believed to transcend not only all nature but also all our representations, including the person category. An expressly Trinitarian theology and religious practice in worship, liturgy, prayers, and hymns, are paired with the knowledge and experience of the ultimate incomprehensibility and ineffability of God's essence.⁸⁵ As Barth pointed out in his Gifford Lectures: 'God is personal, but personal in an incomprehensible way, in so far as the conception of His personality surpasses all our views of personality.'⁸⁶ This may help to direct the power of the intuitive person-concept to the trinitarian persons while allowing for the idea of God to transcend the intuitions linked to a person.

Justification

People engage in all sorts of negotiations with God, regard good behaviour as a source of reward, eternal or earthly, or ask themselves what action triggered a certain misfortune. Even among believers, confidence in divine love, grace, and forgiveness seems to be rather fragile. Many Christians as well as non-Christians believe that salvation can be earned by good behaviour.⁸⁷

⁸³Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: SCM, 2007), 33–34; Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 359–60; Rahner, *Trinity*, 109–15.

⁸⁴Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XIV.8.11; Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), 305–08.

⁸⁵Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: Clarke, 2005), 44–66.

⁸⁶Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God According to the Teaching of the Reformation: Recalling the Scottish Confession of 1560*, trans. J. L. M. Haire and Ian Henderson, Gifford Lectures 1937–38 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938), 31.

⁸⁷According to the 2020 survey 'Perceptions of Sin and Salvation' by Arizona Christian University, 48% of the overall US-population agree that salvation can be earned, only 35% reject this view. Of the Christian participants even 52% agree with this work-based view of salvation; <https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/AWVI-2020-Release-08-Perceptions-of-Sin-and-Salvation.pdf>, accessed 11 May 2022. In the already-mentioned 2018 UK survey by Ligonier Ministries, only 31% of the Protestants agreed with the suggestion: 'God counts a person as righteous not because of one's own works but only because of one's faith in Jesus Christ'.

In contrast, particularly the theologians of the Reformation have stressed that the revealed knowledge of God contradicts the natural knowledge of God in this regard. The latter reaches only God who treats human beings according to their moral behaviour. This is Luther's knowledge of the 'God of the Law' or Aquinas's 'unformed faith' (*fides informis*), which both lack the trust in God's grace and love.⁸⁸ However, God's revelation in Christ means that *despite* the corruption of human nature and *against* all expectations of the natural knowledge, God's true will is to forgive, justify, and redeem humanity. Furthermore, Christian theology rejects the idea that God can be manipulated in a predictable way by human behaviour. The New Testament cautions against the view that misfortune can directly be linked to immoral conduct (Lk. 13) and stresses that even after having kept all divine commandments believers remain 'unworthy servants' (Lk. 17). Good deeds do not constitute a reliable claim to fortune and they are not the condition to earn God's grace. Rather, vice versa, the basis of morally good behaviour is an inner conversion by God's grace. Theology stresses that *prevenient* grace, which is independent of a person's moral behaviour, and genuine faith, be it Aquinas's *fides caritate formata* as friendship with God or the Lutheran faith in God's love, is the precondition from which good deeds flow. According to Christian theology, the experience of unconditional love, not the fear of punishment, leads to virtue or 'good deeds'.

CSR's research confirms the tension between natural and revealed knowledge of God in this matter. Since supernatural agents are intuitively treated as exchange partners, they are regarded as the source of punishment or reward—divine beings that have to be feared. The intuitions involved in the assessment of fortune and misfortune, and in the self-evaluation before God, lend a strong plausibility to this. The close connection between supernatural agents and morality also illuminates why religious institutions are primarily regarded in the public eye as institutions for morality and ethics. The teaching of God's unconditional grace and love is thus extremely counterintuitive—the God of the Law is more credible than the God of the Gospel. Christian preaching and teaching have to take this into account.

Again here, it is important to meet the power of those intuitions on the level of experience. Metaphors of parental love may be helpful as well as pointing to the 'friendship with God' and to Christ, who gave his life for his 'friends' (John 15:13). But even more important is the experience of God's love and grace in worship, liturgy, and individual practice, *e.g.*, spiritual exercises and individual prayer. Rather counter-productive in the light of CSR's research would be the enforcement of God as a lawmaker and judge. This is particularly the case when Christian teaching and preaching focus exclusively on issues of morality and ethics, portraying them as the fulfilment of God's will, without sufficient clarification that Christian ethics has to be rooted in God's *prevenient* grace and love. Even though a purely moral presentation will have a high plausibility, as it meets the intuitive expectations, it will be costly. It risks undermining the genuinely Christian perspective and corroborating the view that the Christian faith is primarily morality rather than an inner transformation by God's love.

V. CONCLUSION

CSR opens some fascinating perspectives on theology and Christian practice. Connecting it with the doctrine of an 'implanted' knowledge of God not only confirms that traditional

⁸⁸For Luther see above, for Aquinas see *ST* II-II q.4 a.4 co., cf. I-II q.109 a.7 co.

theology was right to assume such knowledge, it further illuminates the subject from the perspective of modern science. Moreover, it leads to the correct accommodation of CSR's theories in theology. Theology has to acknowledge that individual faith as well as the comprehensibility of a specific religious tradition are not exclusively based on revelation but also rely on cognitive dispositions which are independent of revelation. Both intuitions and revelation-based faith are related in a dynamic manner, which results in convergences and divergences. Being aware of such a relation expands theological understanding and can inform practitioners of religion in teaching, preaching, and spiritual guidance. This article tried to highlight a few areas in which CSR's theories prove to be relevant: the comprehensibility and plausibility of Christian beliefs as well as the persisting tensions and confusion that the doctrines of the Trinity and divine grace are exposed to.

The present time is characterised by the omnipresence of science. Theological claims about empirical phenomena cannot be based anymore on purely theoretical speculations or even the personal view of a theologian. Science provides insights which are based on a strict and controllable methodology. To deliver the highest standard available as an academic discipline, theology must base its reflections, as far as they relate to empirical reality, on the best understanding available. Therefore, theology today must be a science-engaged theology. This paper may hopefully serve as an example of how classical theology can relate to modern scientific research in a productive and refreshing way.

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