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## **The naturalness of religion and the existence of unbelief**

### **Introductory remarks**

From the point of view of the study of religion based on the assumption that religion is a cultural phenomenon, the conception of the “naturalness” of religion seems to be rather problematic. The naturalness of religion hypothesis appears in various contemporary cognitive approaches to religion, yet it is by no means a new hypothesis. Many philosophers, theologians and historians of religion have entertained the idea of the religious nature of man, interpreting the latter in many different ways. The naturalness of religion hypothesis offers an answer to the following questions: Why is religion found in all human cultures? Why, contrary to many prophecies and scientific predictions, religion does not disappear even in highly developed societies, but rather changes its form, and withdraws especially to the private sphere? While philosophical and theological variants of this hypothesis had usually a speculative character, in the cognitive approach it is justified on the basis of experimental evidence.

The aim of this paper is not so much a detailed reconstruction and criticism of the different versions of this hypothesis as the examination of some of the difficulties it entails. One of the most important difficulties is the existence of people who seem to be devoid of any religious beliefs. Despite the fact that religion is a cultural universal, one can find nonreligious people in all cultures. Regardless of whether they act against religious traditions or are indifferent towards them, the existence of such individuals is substantiated by historical research. Contemporary research on this phenomenon demonstrates that atheism is relatively widespread. The main problem connected to the naturalness of religion hypothesis can be formulated as follows: Is it possible to explain the phenomenon of atheism without rejecting the naturalness of religion hypothesis?

## The concept and range of unbelief

The category of an unbeliever is not less problematic than the category of a religious man. The situation is quite simple in those sociological studies of religiosity which are based on self-declarations. But when one studies attitudes more thoroughly, one becomes convinced that there is a complex world hidden behind obvious declarations which is not easy to describe. This complexity can be already seen in the phase of concept definition. Atheism, anti-theism, religious indifferentism, irreligion and agnosticism are the terms usually used in describing unbelief. The very concept of atheism, which is most frequently used in this context, raises many problems. First of all, it came into being in the background of the monotheistic religions of the Western world. It means that beyond this background its usefulness might appear to be problematic<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, this concept is ambiguous. It can mean that there is no God, or it can mean a lack of belief that God exists. In the former case, an atheist is a person who denies some form of theism; in the latter, it is a person who does not identify with any theistic doctrine. Another problematic issue is that atheism in the former meaning is a conception or attitude that refers to a particular form of theism. Thus, for instance, the difference between a "catholic atheist" and "protestant atheist" is not just a matter of anecdote, since in each case an individual contradicts a different set of beliefs. At the same time, it seems that it is not possible to understand what atheism is without defining theism. It is a well-known fact that the latter term is also ambiguous. In the subsequent part of this paper, atheism is understood as both an attitude that defies particular forms of theisms and attitudes of religious indifference (practical atheism). Broadly understood, atheism can be identified with unbelief.

While the distribution of atheism in the world of the past seems to be difficult to estimate, there is a body of qualitative research on atheism in the contemporary world. According to Phil Zuckerman, if we add up atheists, agnostics and people not believing in any personal God who live in fifty countries with the highest proportion of such individuals, we obtain a number between 505 million and 749 million<sup>2</sup>. This means that nonbelievers constitute the fourth largest group after the followers of Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. The largest proportion of nonbelievers lives in such countries as Sweden, Vietnam, Denmark, Japan, Czech Republic and Finland. The quoted data point out that today the broadly understood atheism is not a marginal phenomenon. Furthermore, in many, though not all developed and developing countries one can observe a rise in the number of people who describe themselves as atheists and agnostics. In most cases this is a result of the improvement of life conditions and the growth of wealth. It is not clear,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, M. Martin (ed.), Cambridge 2007, p. 1. This does not imply, however that atheism is an exclusively Western phenomenon. See: A. Geertz, G. Markusson, *Religion Is Natural, Atheism Is Not: On Why Everybody Is Both Right and Wrong*, "Religion", 2010, no. 40, p. 157.

<sup>2</sup> See P. Zuckerman, *Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, M. Martin (ed.), op. cit., p. 55. Such a wide range results from that P. Zuckerman refers to many different researchers who study this issue.

however, whether this trend will continue, since the growth of wealth is accompanied by the decrease of the birth-rate.

There is a common view that in pre-modern Europe atheism was a rare phenomenon. A common picture of the religiosity in the Middle Ages, which was reputedly much more intensive than today's religiosity, well illustrates this view. However, there are many doubts concerning this view. As Rodney Stark points out, on the basis of research carried out by historians of the Middle Ages and the modern era, the so called "golden age of piety" never existed. On the other hand, there were many myths that overestimate the religiosity of pre-modern societies<sup>3</sup>. It may be the case that the conviction that the number of atheists increased along with the coming of the industrial revolution results from our limited knowledge of the distribution of this phenomenon in the pre-industrial era.

### The naturalness of religion hypothesis

The naturalness of religion hypothesis was formulated by cognitive scientists of religion. According to Justin Barrett, one of the leading representatives of this approach, religion is a natural phenomenon since it can be understood as "the natural product of aggregated *ordinary* cognitive processes"<sup>4</sup>. The emphasis placed on the word "ordinary" means that what is important in religion are not so much specific and unusual emotions, experiences and beliefs as ordinary processes underlying religious belief and action as well as everyday life. Certainly, the belief in gods is not solely a consequence of the existence of particular cognitive mechanisms whose interaction produces particular representations and actions. Human minds exist in the world, i.e. in a particular social and cultural environment. The influence of the environment is also a vital factor which plays a role in shaping and maintaining representations of supernatural beings in human minds. The cognitive approach can be also extended to the study of the brain structures that underlie particular cognitive mechanisms, but it must be remembered that (1) the study of such structures is not a goal of the cognitive approach; (2) the naturalness of religion thesis has little in common with a popular belief that there is a kind of a "God module" or that there are brain structures producing particular religious representations and behaviour. Although the claim that ordinary cognitive processes underlying religious cognition have some neural correlates seems to be justified, it does not imply that there are some specific "religious" areas in the human brain. What is more probable is that religious ideas are by-products of ordinary cognitive mechanisms that may have some neural correlates.

When talking about cognitive mechanisms underlying religious thought, one has usually in mind such mechanisms as the ability to detect agents in the environment, the ability to "read" minds (Theory of Mind), and especially to create representations of other

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. R. Stark, *Secularization, R.I.P.*, "Sociology of Religion", 1999, no. 60 (3), p. 255-260.

<sup>4</sup> J. L. Barrett, *Exploring the Natural Foundations of Religion*, "Trends in Cognitive Sciences", 2000, no. 4 (1), p. 29.

people mental states, as well as a set of intuitive expectations concerning things in the world. For instance, the ability to detect intentional agency allows for a quick, though not always successful detection of agents. According to scholars who study this issue, the activation threshold of this mental mechanism is low. If information coming from the environment is ambiguous, an agent equipped with this mechanism has a tendency to detect agency even where there are no agents. The same is true about a human being who is predisposed to search for agents in his/her environment and who sometimes detects agency in the inanimate world (e.g. when walking in a forest one can easily mistake for a moment a moving branch for an agent)<sup>5</sup>. An important role in religion is also played by two levels of information processing: reflective and non-reflective (intuitive). Although declared religious beliefs are usually reflective, they are based on non-reflective beliefs which are usually non-conscious. For believers, religious beliefs seem to be reliable just because, among other things, they are based on intuitive beliefs concerning things in the world<sup>6</sup>.

Moreover, the conception of the naturalness of religion relies on an assumption that some thoughts or behaviour are more natural than others. According to this view, one can postulate the continuum of naturalness and the non-naturalness of thought and behaviour. As Justin Barrett points out, "The naturalness of a particular thought or action refers to its degree of fluency, ease, automaticity, and reflexivity. Speaking our native language, walking, doing simple arithmetic, and other tasks usually are 'natural' in this cognitive sense. Learning a new language, ballet dancing, and doing advanced calculus are relatively 'unnatural'"<sup>7</sup>. The naturalness of religion hypothesis also refers to a more concrete issue, namely to the fact that religious thought and behaviour develop in the course of the ordinary development of a human individual, irrespective of a particular cultural support. This means that religious thought and behaviour specific to an individual is not just a result of a cultural transmission of particular religious beliefs but, to a considerable degree, it comes into being in a natural way, i.e. as a result operation and interaction of the aforementioned cognitive mechanisms.

Other versions of the naturalness of religion hypothesis take slightly different forms. One of the first supporters of the discussed conception in the field of the cognitive science of religion was Pascal Boyer. According to Boyer, the naturalness of religion can be understood in many different ways. First of all, natural can be some aspects of religious ideas, namely those which depend on non-cultural constraints. The latter include the human genome, the operation of the human brain and the features of the human world<sup>8</sup>. In particular, Boyer points out that both the content and structure of religious ideas depend to a certain degree on the features of the human mind/brain. There is, however,

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<sup>5</sup> The issue of mental tools or cognitive mechanisms that play a role in producing and maintaining religious representations is discussed in J. L. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God*, Walnut Creek 2004.

<sup>6</sup> J. L. Barrett, *Theological Correctness: Cognitive Constraint and the Study of Religion*, "Methods and Theory in the Study of Religion", 1999, no. 11, p. 325-339.

<sup>7</sup> J. L. Barrett, *The Relative Unnaturalness of Atheism*, "Religion", 2010, no. 40, p. 169.

<sup>8</sup> P. Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion*, Berkeley 1994, p. 3.

yet another concept of naturalness which can be used in explaining religious ideas. In this second sense naturalness refers to the individual's feeling that some religious ideas are self-evident and intuitive. Many scholars have a conviction that such a feeling accompanies religious belief and that it is a product of socialization. However, according to Boyer religious ideas are not natural in that second sense; on the contrary, ideas of supernatural beings contain elements that violate intuitive expectations concerning the world. To a minimal degree, they are counter-intuitive. Thanks to that they easily spread in a population because they are – according to research on recalling of such concepts – more easily acquired by individuals. Nevertheless, the naturalness of religion thesis (in the second sense) remains valid. Natural (non-cultural) constraints on religious ideas in the form of cognitive processes considerably reduce the possible repertoire of those ideas. As a result, one can observe a recurrence of some ideas in religions of the world<sup>9</sup>.

Although the debate over the naturalness/non-naturalness of religion and irreligion sometimes has an ideological character, it is above all a debate concerning issues that are fundamental for the study of religion and that can be decided in empirical research. Sometimes, however, it is not possible to differentiate between ideological commitment and empirical research. Both theistic and atheistic commitments are connected to the defense of those positions and sometimes they result in activity that propagates theistic and atheistic ideas. On the contrary, the aim of the scientific study of religion is mainly theoretical: explanation and interpretation of religious phenomena. A good example of the interpenetration of ideological commitment to atheism and theoretical attitude are the works of the representatives of the so called new atheism, e.g. the works of R. Dawkins and Daniel Dennett<sup>10</sup>. New atheism becomes a part of a social movement which tries to get rid of religion or diminish the influence of religious institutions in the public sphere.

It cannot be ignored that the terms “naturalness” and “non-naturalness” sometimes play an ideological function in many kinds of discourse, i.e. they are used to evaluate phenomena. They are used in an evaluative way especially when they refer to the human world. In the scientific study of religion, particularly in the cognitive approach to the study of religion, where the naturalness of religion hypothesis is among the most fundamental claims, these terms are used in a neutral way. They refer to the operation of mental mechanisms that underlie religious representations as well as to the representations which came into being as a result of the functioning of these mechanisms. Nevertheless, the latter understanding of naturalness and non-naturalness may easily transform into a value judgments on the basis of which phenomena seen as unnatural are to be eliminated and the phenomena seen as natural are to be maintained.

In an ideological perspective, the naturalness and non-naturalness of religion and atheism means that religion is not a matter of contingency, i.e. a phenomenon that exists

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<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, London 2006; D. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, New York 2006.

because particular external factors maintain its existence. Instead, it is rather a self-imposing form of human existence. Since religion is a natural phenomenon, irreligion seems to be a product of culture which, indeed, appears in different periods of time and in different cultures, but at the same time, in order to develop, requires some conditions to be fulfilled. In this context, culture is usually seen as a reality that originates from nature. This view may result in actions such as resisting the removal of religion from public life. Since religion is, to a considerable degree, a natural product of the operations of the human mind, all attempts to remove it from public life go against human nature, i.e. against a deeply rooted tendency that has always characterized a human individual and social life.

### **The naturalness of religion and the issue of unbelief**

The naturalness of religion hypothesis contradicts the widespread opinion that becoming a religious person is a matter of socialization, and religion is first of all, if not exclusively, conditioned by socio-cultural factors. If we make a thought experiment in which a group of infants is placed on a desert island, it is not likely, according to the followers of the socio-cultural approach, that they create their own religion since religious ideas are transmitted from generation to generation<sup>11</sup>. Such a view could be supported both by everyday observation and sociological research on religion. On the other hand, however, there is a body of experimental research that has been carried out by psychologists which shows that religious ideas are very readily acquired by children. This research suggests that what counts in the process of the acquisition of religious ideas is not only the cultural transmission, but also children's susceptibility to religious ideas. This means that the human mind is prone to believe in immortal beings, having superhuman powers and knowledge<sup>12</sup>. The model of the acquisition of religious ideas in which socialization plays a fundamental role can be, to a considerable degree, combined with the model that emphasizes the role of inborn cognitive mechanisms, since the easiness with which a child acquires religious ideas probably results from the operation of those mechanisms. However, focusing exclusively on religion as a cultural phenomenon does not allow to explain why some religious ideas are very widespread in a population.

The most obvious counter argument to the naturalness of religion thesis is the existence of nonreligious people including those who are indifferent to any religion as well as those who intentionally reject religion. In other words, if religion is natural in one of the above senses, why then do atheists exist? Should atheism be described as a non-natural phenomenon? How one can explain the existence of atheism in different cultures and areas, and especially the spread of unbelief in many of today's Western countries? Every theory of religion which defends the naturalness of religion thesis should provide answers to the above questions, i.e. it should provide an explanation of both religion and irreligion.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. A. Geertz, G. Markusson, *Religion Is Natural, Atheism Is Not...*, op. cit., p. 156.

<sup>12</sup> J. L. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe...*, op. cit., p. 87.

Such an explanation of atheism was presented by Barrett. Being an atheist may be unproblematic for somebody who holds an atheistic worldview, but in fact it does not come easy. It can be compared to playing the piano by a virtuoso who performs piano pieces without difficulty but who had to put a lot of effort and perhaps many years of practice into this activity before he/she became an outstanding pianist. Unbelief is a superficial and secondary phenomenon. It comes into being as a result of socio-cultural factors whose existence is a necessary condition of atheistic attitudes. Unbelief is thus by no means a “default” mode of human life which is then suppressed by some religious indoctrination; on the contrary, it is a secondary phenomenon that appears in a particular socio-cultural context. Moreover, unbelief requires an extra cognitive effort because it is repeatedly challenged by spontaneously generated intuitive beliefs that are natural by-products of our cognitive apparatus<sup>13</sup>. This is because of the aforementioned cognitive mechanisms which, in many situations, automatically deliver theistic solutions. A subject usually adopts these solutions without difficulty, since it is done unconsciously, beyond the control of reflection. On the other hand, their rejection, as in the case of an atheist, requires finding an alternative, reflective explanation of the observed event or reflective solution to the encountered problem<sup>14</sup>. The need for meaning induces a human being to search the explanation everywhere where there are no self-evident answers. This means that an atheist, rejecting intuitive answers, is forced to deal with the problem of meaning in a much more sophisticated, and thus – from a cognitive perspective – more expensive way, by creating reflective explanations of problematic events.

There are also other difficulties accompanying an atheistic attitude. They are connected to specific human moral feelings as well as the experiences of other people’s deaths. An atheist has moral intuitions accompanied by the problem of how these intuitions can be justified. A reflective justification requires a cognitive effort. Such problems are usually not faced by religious believers who can find a confirmation of his/her moral intuitions e.g. in the will of God. The same is true about the atheist’s experience of other people’s deaths in which all intuitions concerning dead people, and especially the conviction that some life processes continue to operate after death, must be questioned<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> It must be emphasized that some rationalized religious doctrines involve beliefs that violate intuitive expectations to a considerable degree, and therefore they require an intensified cognitive effort and institutional support.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. J. L. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe...*, op. cit., p. 110. As an example one can point to the mechanism termed a hyperactive agency detection device which underlines beliefs in supernatural beings. For a theist the attribution of agency is relatively simple: if detected agency cannot be attributed to any human or animal being, the agency may be attributed to a supernatural being. The situation is much more complicated in the case of an atheist who cannot interpret the detected agency in terms of superhuman agents. The only alternative for an atheist is to interpret the detection as a cognitive error. What is important in this example is that the problem encountered by an atheist requires a conscious and reflective explanation.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. ibidem, p. 111. On the intuitions concerning non-living beings see J. M. Bering, *Intuitive Conceptions of Dead Agents’ Minds: The Natural Foundations of Afterlife Beliefs as Phenomenological Boundary*, “Journal of Cognition and Culture”, 2002, no. 2 (4), p. 263-308.

But if the atheistic attitude encounters problems more difficult to overcome than those faced by the theistic attitude, why do so many people today declare themselves to be atheists? When answering this question, Barrett points to the changes which started in modern times and intensified during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely urbanization, industrialization, affluence which allowed people to study at a higher level and to have more leisure time, and last but not least the growth of knowledge and technology<sup>16</sup>. This answer is not, of course, original. All phenomena mentioned above were identified by sociologists as the causes of secularization. What is novel is the idea that socio-cultural reality that arose as a result of these changes is a new context for the functioning of mental tools responsible for the development and maintenance of religious beliefs. The cognitive approach to religion is not limited to the study of cognitive mechanisms underlying religion, but it also emphasizes the role of the environment in affecting the final form of mental products.

The urban environment, which is characterized by the high degree of differentiation of individuals and their beliefs and in which different beliefs are easily confronted, favours atheistic attitudes because it provides a range of possibilities of an alternative reflective interpretation of non-reflective theistic beliefs. Moreover, a city is in large measure a man-made environment inhabited by a great number of people. In such an environment agency can be easily ascribed to human beings. On the other hand, industrialization results in the partial isolation of man from the natural world and in the creation of an artificial world which can be controlled by man to a greater degree than the world of nature. Thanks to school education individuals acquire the tools for the reflective interpretation of intuitive beliefs which enable them to create and spread an alternative to the beliefs involved in theistic doctrines. Intuitive representations, previously interpreted in a reflexive way in the framework of theistic doctrines, can be now interpreted in a different way on the basis of specialist knowledge<sup>17</sup>. Atheism thus comes into being in specific social and cultural circumstances. Although it was present in past centuries, atheists were a minority. Widespread atheism is a relatively new phenomenon.

The conclusion of Barrett's studies is that in principle atheism does not contradict the naturalness of religion thesis because irrespective of its distribution in contemporary Western societies, it can be characterized by some degree of "non-naturalness" in the above sense. The spread of atheism requires not only suitable socio-cultural conditions but also an active cultural support in result of which the products of the functioning of cognitive mechanisms will be suppressed or adequately interpreted. First of all, atheism has its root in reflective thought and requires considerable cognitive effort.

Although what Barrett proposed is merely an outline of the explanation of atheism which is not sufficiently grounded in empirical data, it allows to understand atheism within the framework of cognitive approaches to religion which advance the naturalness of religion thesis. The concepts of the relative naturalness of religion and the relative

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<sup>16</sup> J. L. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe...*, op. cit., p. 116.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 116-117.



unnaturalness of atheism are not – in spite of appearances – value-laden but refer to cognitive features of ideas and beliefs. The naturalness of religion hypothesis provides an explanation why religion is among cultural universals, why there are similar religious ideas in different cultures, why religious rituals take a particular form, and why supernatural beings play a fundamental role in most religions<sup>18</sup>. Properly interpreted, the hypothesis, along with additional assumptions, allows for the explanation of the existence of unbelief. The assumptions do not limit the validity of this hypothesis but rather modify it by putting an emphasis on the role of socio-cultural determinants.

From the point of view of the cognitive science of religion, Barrett's conception of atheism is not the only one worth noting. Accepting the naturalness of religion thesis, Armin Geertz i Guðmundur I. Markusson question the idea that the existence of atheism undermines this thesis. It does not, because atheism appears as a phenomenon less natural than religion. Atheism is based on the same natural cognitive dispositions of the mind as theism. According to the authors, such an assumption allows for the explanation of the spread of atheism. Instead of emphasizing the influence of industrialization and urbanization on the spread of atheism, they point out that in modern societies the influence of religion is decreasing and that atheism is not a modern phenomenon<sup>19</sup>. They, too, agree that the naturalness of religion hypothesis has a probabilistic, not deterministic character. Religiousness is not an anthropological necessity due to the fact that the cognitive processes which can facilitate the spread of theistic beliefs in a population as well as make the occurrence of atheism less probable and cognitively more difficult, do not exist in a vacuum but in a particular socio-cultural environment. The cognitive explanation of atheism is incomplete if it does not take into account cultural ecology. When one takes into account the role of cultural systems that constitute an environment where cognition takes place, one will come to the conclusion that atheism is not unnatural. Geertz and Markusson focus, among other things, on semiotic phenomena which underlie today's new atheism.

The problem of atheism may also result from research difficulties encountered by students of religion and atheism. When talking about theism and atheism, scholars usually focus more on reflective beliefs that are easily available for a researcher than on the non-reflective unconscious cognitive processes. Research on religiosity shows, however, that religious people have a tendency to entertain two different kinds of beliefs, namely reflective and non-reflective (intuitive) beliefs<sup>20</sup>. In other words, religious beliefs may be represented on two different levels. Reflective religious beliefs are usually connected to a particular theological doctrine and expressed in common religious language. On the other hand, non-reflective beliefs are based on intuitive knowledge which is used in everyday life. Regardless of how a particular religious doctrine represents gods, religious

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<sup>18</sup> A. Geertz, G. Markusson, *Religion Is Natural, Atheism Is Not...*, op. cit., p. 156.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 157.

<sup>20</sup> J. L. Barrett, *Theological Correctness...*, op. cit.; J. L. Barrett, F. C. Keil, *Conceptualizing a Nonnatural Entity: Anthropomorphism in God Concepts*, "Cognitive Psychology", 1996, no. 31.

people have a tendency to represent them on the basis of intuitive knowledge about the world which appears early in childhood. According to many cognitive scientists, religious thought is always based on non-reflective knowledge irrespective of whether and to what degree a theological doctrine diverges from this knowledge. For example, assume that from the point of view of a doctrine, as well as of a man who believes in the doctrine, God is understood as an immaterial, omnipotent and all-knowing being. In a situation that requires a quick interpretation of events, a man who believes in such a God will have a tendency to represent God in a quite different way, i.e. using intuitive knowledge common to all people. The intuitively represented God concept will probably take an anthropomorphic form – it will be represented as a person with many limitations<sup>21</sup>.

The above conception has important consequences for understanding atheism. It is probable that there are intuitive ideas hidden behind the declarations of atheism. In his research Jesse Bering points out that individuals who declare that they do not believe in the existence of the soul or consciousness after death have at the same time a tendency to think that dead people have some cognitive abilities (e.g. they know that they are dead). Moreover, holding these two beliefs at the same time does not cause cognitive dissonance because each of them operates on a different level: the former has a reflective and the latter non-reflective character. At the intuitive level, the disappearance of biological functions does not imply the disappearance of cognitive and emotional states<sup>22</sup>. This means that irrespective of what declarations are made by individuals with respect to their religious beliefs, or lack of beliefs, the individuals have a tendency to hold beliefs which are a part of intuitive knowledge common to all people. This does not mean, of course, that all atheists or agnostics are crypto-religious people. What is important is that atheism is a set of reflective beliefs that require considerable cognitive effort. The study of reflective beliefs which is based e.g. on a structured interview do not provide sufficient knowledge about what is going on in the minds of people who declare themselves as atheists or agnostics<sup>23</sup>. The answer to this question can be found through experimental research.

According to the approach oriented towards the biological determinants of religiosity and unbelief, both cognitive and evolutionary approaches to religion have some deficiencies. One of them is underestimating biological factors, and especially the existence of biological variations in human populations. Benson Saler and Charles A. Ziegler agree that religion – to the degree to which it can be identified with theism – is a natural phenomenon. The ideas of supernatural beings are developed and maintained as a result of the functioning of some ‘tools’ or modules of the mind such as the mechanism that detects agency in the environment. However, contrary to Barrett’s assumption, those modules do not function in the same way in the minds of all individuals. It is probable that there is an individual variation in their functioning. Such a biological variation may, for

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. *ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> J. Bering, *Intuitive Conceptions of Dead Agents’ Minds*, op. cit., p. 288.

<sup>23</sup> J. Bering, *Atheism Is Only Skin Deep*, “Religion”, 2010, no. 40, p. 167.

example, affect the sensitivity of the aforementioned agency detection device. The authors point out that the reduction of the sensitivity (raising the activation threshold) increases the individual's susceptibility to atheism<sup>24</sup>.

The fundamental difference between the conception presented by Saler and Ziegler, on the one hand, and the position defended by Barrett consists in that while the latter explains atheisms by pointing out to the environmental factors that suppress some products of a mental module, the former researchers argue for the existence of individual differences in the functioning of the module. This means that in their explanation of atheism they focus not only on environmental factors but also on biological factors. Unfortunately, Saler and Ziegler's hypothesis seems to lack sufficient empirical confirmation. In order to confirm this hypothesis, one should provide an answer to the two following questions: 1. Is there any genetic mechanism that could produce differences in the sensitivity of the agency detection device?; (2) Are there any biological factors underlying social attitudes such as theism and atheism?<sup>25</sup> According to the authors, there is no empirical research that could provide answers to these questions. The view presented above seems to have a limited value in explaining fundamental differences between areas of the worlds and also between particular religions.

## Conclusion

From the cognitive perspective, it is possible to explain the phenomenon of atheism without the rejection and even modification of the naturalness of religion thesis. This is not a deterministic, but rather probabilistic hypothesis. This means that the naturalness of religion does not make atheism impossible, but rather reduces the probability of its occurrence. On the other hand, the occurrence of religion is probable but not necessary<sup>26</sup>. One can imagine a culture without any religion, but its existence does not seem to be probable. Although the conception of atheism presented by cognitive scientists entails many problems, their explanation of atheism seems to be reliable provided that the naturalness of religion conception is understood as an empirical hypothesis that has been only partly confirmed in research to date.

According to the approach that makes use of the naturalness of religion hypothesis, atheism is a phenomenon which requires an explanation no less than theism. What is questionable is the claim that atheism is a default condition of the human being who is then transformed – as a result of the processes of socialization – into a religious person. More probable is the scenario according to which an individual readily acquires religious ideas because these ideas fit with intuitive knowledge and are maintained by the functioning of some ordinary cognitive mechanisms.

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<sup>24</sup> B. Saler, Ch. A. Ziegler, *Atheism and the Apotheosis of Agency*, "Temenos", 2006, no. 42 (2), p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> A. Geertz, G. Markusson, *Religion Is Natural, Atheism Is Not...*, op. cit., p. 156.