

DOSSIER

Philosophy and the Cognitive Science of Religion

The solution is for people to learn to disregard the boundaries of this or that artificial "area" (or, indeed, this or that discipline) and simply follow the questions they are trying to answer wherever they lead (Susan Haack in Carrier, 2012).

The Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) is a multi-disciplinary academic field that draws from religious studies, sociology, cognitive psychology, anthropology, cognitive neuroscience, and evolutionary biology. In the last twenty-five years, CSR has anchored the study of religion in up-to-date scientific explanations of human cognitive architecture, offering a viable program of research to show how well-understood natural cognitive predispositions shape and constrain the mental representation and cultural distribution of religious beliefs (Barrett, 2007). While less than three decades ago there was no such thing as CSR, today it boasts dozens of authored and edited volumes as well as numerous academic centers featuring its activities. Findings from CSR have even attracted the attention of the popular media, appearing in such places as *The New York Times Magazine* (Henig, 2007) and *The Atlantic* (Bloom, 2005). As with every other new discipline, CSR has raised questions about the philosophical foundations and implications of such a scientific approach. Our aim in this dossier is to deal with some of the issues of methodology that have been raised with respect to the scientific study of religion while exploring areas of contact between CSR and moral philosophy, folk psychology, epistemology, social cognition, and psychopathology, among others.

The dossier opens with *Twenty-five years in: Landmark empirical findings in the cognitive science of religion*,¹ in which Robert N. McCauley, one of the founders of CSR, reviews the most important experimental results of the field and critiques the methodological assumptions underlying it. According to McCauley, Religious Studies' persisting exclusionary ethos has skewed the field in favor of the idiosyncratic over the recurrent, of the idiographic over the systematic, and of the interpretive over the explanatory—a tendency that has curbed innovation. McCauley defends the promise of the cognitive sciences for studying religion as a way to redress those imbalances, suggesting that greater attention to the recurrent, the systematic, and the explanatory will enrich, but not eliminate, our understandings and our inquiries.

In *Evolutionary theory on the move: New perspectives on evolution in the cognitive science of religion*, István Czachesz critically examines the use of evolutionary theory in CSR. After investigating the definition of evolution and describing the Modern Synthesis which reconciled Darwin's theory of evolution and Mendel's ideas on heredity in a joint framework, Czachesz considers various evolutionary perspectives in CSR, including evolutionary psychology, sexual

¹ Many thanks to Robert N. McCauley for offering to let us reprint his article here, as well as to Lalle Pursglove and Camilla Erskine at Bloomsbury Academic for their permission. The article was originally published as chapter 6 of McCauley and Lawson (2017): MCCAULEY, R.N.; LAWSON, E.T. (cont.). 2017. *Philosophical Foundations of the Cognitive Science of Religion: A Head Start*. London, Bloomsbury Academic, 184 p. Available at: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/philosophical-foundations-of-the-cognitive-science-of-religion-9781350030312/> Reprinted with permission from Bloomsbury Academic.

selection, gene-culture co-evolution, and cultural evolution. Finally, Czachesz turns to the problems with the Modern Synthesis and presents a new approach based on network theory, with potential applications to the study of biological and cultural systems.

In *The cognitive science of religion: Implications for morality*, John P. Teehan considers the moral role of religion in human evolutionary history and the insights that CSR provides into the continuing influence of religion in human affairs. After setting out the evolved cognitive bases of religious beliefs and behaviors, Teehan proposes that religions constitute moral worldviews that emerge from and tap into deep moral and emotional instincts. Teehan concludes that this makes religion, and moral worldviews more generally, profoundly important, but also dangerously problematic. Finally, he offers a case study of the intersection of religion, race, and politics in contemporary American Presidential politics to further explicate these ideas.

In *Sorting through, and sorting out, anthropomorphism in CSR*, K. Mitch Hodge reviews and discusses the various ways by which researchers in CSR have empirically demonstrated that neurotypical humans represent supernatural agents through the cognitive analogical processes of anthropomorphism. These include attributing to these agents a human-like mind, human-like physical and mental limitations, and human-like sociability. Hodge points to several problematic issues that CSR must address, such as how to better demarcate when the folk is anthropomorphizing versus simply attributing agency, and how CSR's declaration that the folk represents supernatural agents as disembodied minds places it at odds with a wealth of evidence to the contrary.

In *Debunking and fully apt belief*, Joshua C. Thurow considers whether well-confirmed CSR theories can discredit religious beliefs. He employs Ernest Sosa's theory of knowledge as fully apt belief, which avoids objections that have been leveled against sensitivity and safety principles often used in debunking arguments. Thurow then sketches a plausible debunking argument for religious belief on the assumption that religious belief is formed simply through processes theorized by CSR. However, Thurow points out that since most believers also rely on arguments of various other types, their beliefs are not thereby debunked.

In *Predictive coding and religious belief*, Hans Van Eyghen investigates the epistemic implications of a recent theory of religious cognition that draws on predictive coding. The theory maintains that certain experiences are heavily shaped by a subject's prior religious beliefs and thereby makes religious believers prone to detect invisible agents. In light of the new theory, Van Eyghen reformulates existing arguments based on older theories of religious cognition, namely, the unreliability, unsafety, and naturalness arguments. He argues that the new theory does not adjudicate for or against the positive epistemic status of religious beliefs.

In *Davidsonian semantic theory and cognitive science of religion*, Mark Q. Gardiner and Steven Engler explore a tension

between CSR and Donald Davidson's view of first-person authority, which stems from semantic holism: namely, that we know what is meant when we speak in a way that we do not when others speak. If CSR is correct that the causes of religious belief are located in cognitive processes in the mind/brain, then religious insiders might have no idea what they are talking about: only the scholar of CSR would have a chance of knowing what they "really" mean. Gardiner and Engler argue that the solution to this problem is taking seriously semantic holism's rejection of semantic bifurcation and thereby rejecting the idea that religious and non-religious language can be sharply distinguished.

In *Shared rituals and religious beliefs*, Daniel De Luca-Noronha asks what could explain the fact that agents are generally committed to performing actions based on religious beliefs even when these are not obviously adaptive. After presenting the cognitivist hypothesis which explains such commitment on the basis of internal cognitive mechanisms, De Luca-Noronha offers objections that constrain that model's explanatory power. He then examines Henrich's proposal that the cultural learner commits to a given religious belief when she witnesses displays based on that belief in appropriate situations. Finally, De Luca-Noronha argues that we can strengthen this insight by focusing on the shared character of the rituals that facilitate religious belief transmission and adopting an interactionist model of social cognition.

Finally, in *The acquisition of religious belief and the attribution of delusion*, José Eduardo Porcher explores the boundaries between religious belief and clinical delusion. After distinguishing between institutional and personal religious belief, Porcher reviews how CSR has accounted for cultural processes in the acquisition of institutional religious beliefs. He then presents the clinical definition of delusion, underlining the fact that it exempts cultural beliefs from clinical diagnosis, thus setting the stage for exploring cognitive models of the intuitive attribution of mental disorders. Porcher argues that even though some institutional religious beliefs may seem as strange as the most florid delusions, humans can readily recognize that they are not the product of mental dysfunction due to the fact that their acquisition and transmission is embedded within a cultural context.

Each in their own way, the essays that make up this dossier exemplify a welcome and growing trend of interdisciplinary collaboration between philosophers and cognitive scientists which takes to heart Davidson's adage: 'there is no clear line between philosophy and science. Where there are no fixed boundaries only the timid never risk trespass' (1980, p. 113). These contributions demonstrate that the collaboration between philosophy and cognitive science is, at its best, a two-way street. Philosophy stands to gain because cognitive science offers a wealth of concrete examples with which to test theories in fields such as moral philosophy, epistemology, and philosophy of mind (among others). In turn, cognitive science stands to gain from the employment of philosophical analysis through the clarification of concepts, the analysis of

empirical results, and, in the best case scenario, the assessment of the relationship between data and interpretation in order to foster a critical attitude towards scientific methodologies and inspire progress.

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