BOOK REVIEW

McCauley, Robert N. and Thomas E. Lawson. 2017. *Philosophical Foundations of the Cognitive Science of Religion: A Head Start*. London: Bloomsbury. xii + 179 pp. ISBN: 978-1-3500-3031-2 £85.00 (hbk); 978-1-3501-0586-7 £28.99 (pbk); 978-1-3500-3032-9 £31.30 (ebook).

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This book brings together six seminal articles on the core methodological, theoretical and philosophical issues related to the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR). Two of these articles were written by McCauley alone and four were written with his long-term collaborator E. Thomas Lawson, both of whom were undeniably pioneers in the field of CSR. It will certainly serve as a “head start” for anyone interested in educating themselves about CSR and provides a crucial articulation of the philosophical groundwork upon which CSR and scientific approaches to the study of religion more generally depend.

The book is determined to justify the inclusion of CSR within the broader study of religion from which the authors felt it was once unfairly excluded. McCauley relates in the preface to the book that he had to leave religious studies and pursue philosophy due to the closed-mindedness of many scholars of religion; doing so gave him a clearer view of what was to be done with the study of religion. Religious studies may be different now in many respects but some of these issues have not gone away and these critiques first penned in the early 1990s are still quite relevant. Stereotypes about CSR still abound in some religious studies circles, especially among those that think they can “explain away” all religion or that CSR is exclusively concerned with brain scans.

It is particularly stimulating to read scholarship that relates the study of religion to the philosophy of science. Overall it is remarkable how accessibly they have explained these debates and concepts, though readers like me, who haven’t touched academic philosophy from early undergraduate studies, may need to read certain passages closely! This work provides one with a greater sense of the place of religious studies within the sciences. This book should be included as a core text in any theory and method course which discusses CSR and the relationship between religious studies and philosophy or science.

The first chapter “Explanatory Pluralism and the Cognitive Science of Religion” is playfully subtitled “Or Why Scholars of Religion Should Stop Worrying about Reductionism”. Scholars of religion often work with an outdated (and to a large extent never successfully practised) model of reduction. McCauley points to the logical-positivist school as culpable for disseminating the crude understanding of reduction as “explaining away”

or eliminating the need for research in a given area of inquiry. He advocates “explanatory pluralism” as the ability to borrow from and collaborate between sciences because scientists are supposed to be “evidential opportunists”, looking for relevant explanations and data wherever it can be found. He points out that while rival theories have been eliminated by newly ascendant ones, these are almost always within specific sciences. Inter-scientific reductions carried out at a “lower” (simpler) level of analysis often serve simply to validate and contribute to research carried out at “higher” levels.

The second chapter “Interpretation and Explanation” amounts to nothing less than a defence of the scientific study of religion. Lawson and McCauley contend simply that “religion” (and “culture”) can be subject to both interpretation and explanatory theorizing and that these approaches need not be subordinate to one another as has so often been the case. They critique the hermeneutic attempt to turn all social research into a “text” which within the study of religion carries the danger of privileging textual and doctrinal forms of religion over others. The attempt to exclude general, comparative theorizing is especially naïve because it ignores the way relevant information is guided by implicit principles of selection.

Also written in collaboration with Lawson, the third chapter, “The Crisis of Conscience, Riddle of Identity”, explores the issues with the attempt to overcome anthropology’s colonial history and the question of demarcating religious studies as a distinct field with a distinct object of study. The misguided solution in both cases was to rely purely on interpretive humanities methodologies and reject scientific approaches. The authors acknowledge that the colonial history of anthropology was an issue but point to the fact that embracing a scientific approach brings with it concerns for rigour, transparency and indeed research ethics that do not privilege the subjective preoccupations of the researcher. They rightly reject the crypto-theological attempt to cast “religion” as *sui generis* and point to the fact that relying on the distinctiveness of human subjectivity would hardly provide grounds for the specialness of “religion” in any case. A later chapter written by McCauley, “Overcoming Barriers to a Cognitive Psychology of Religion”, similarly critiques the notion of “culture” as somehow especially autonomous, pointing to the fact that this is undermined by the acceptance of the psychic unity of humanity. Culture cannot be completely autonomous because the very act of ethnography depends on underlying cognitive capacities and the promise that other cultures are intelligible.

The final piece written with Lawson, “Who Owns Culture?”, challenges the presumptiveness of anthropologists (“the prima donna of the social sciences”) who assert ownership of the concept and the peculiar deference often accorded to them by scholars of religion. This is based on the notion that cultures must be studied holistically rather than according to specific distinguishable areas such as economics, politics, art or religion, and this is also used to undermine comparative explanatory endeavours. As they put it, either every other field in the social sciences are wrong or it is anthropology that is wrong! I have felt for a long time that the anxiety about the subject-specific nature of religious studies and lack of a common methodology is based on constant comparisons with anthropology and sociology which entirely forgets about fields such as political science. It would have been interesting had they made more of an attempt to engage with the work of J. Z. Smith who specifically pointed to the rather ironically primitivist assumptions of the holistic position.

In the final chapter “Twenty-Five Years In”, McCauley does demonstrate an awareness of the critical school of religious studies represented by figures such as Russell McCutcheon and Tim Fitzgerald. Though his primary concern was charting developments within CSR, it would have been interesting for him to have engaged with this more widely. It is

admitted that some of the phenomena usually classed as “religious” can be researched in a manner that deflates the concept of “religion”. Nonetheless, in many ways their approach (and CSR more generally) has pointed to the ways in which “religion” can be used as a comparative device in the analysis of human cognition and behaviour which does draw attention to cross-cultural features. One of the examples discussed in the book is the evidence of ritual practices among Neanderthals and possible indication of relations with supernatural beings or presumptions of life after death. This relates to some of the experiments mentioned in the final chapter which demonstrate the pervasiveness of conceptions of the continuation of life after death and implicit theistic assumptions in children. Theorizing the relation between these cognitive processes and cultural myths or practices is distinguishable from the worthy study of the processes by which the culturally contingent category of “religion”, especially as a distinct social domain, was imposed and the means by which the category is used as a political legitimator.