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Book Review

Martin, Luther H. and Donald Wiebe (eds) 2017. *Religion Explained? The Cognitive Science of Religion after Twenty-five Years.* xi + 260 pp. London: Bloomsbury. ISBN: 978-1-350-03246-0 £85.00 (hbk); 978-13501-0592-8 £28.99 (pbk); 978-13500-3247-7 £31.30 (e-book).

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This book presents a range of perspectives on the origins, developments, successes and excesses of the cognitive science of religion (CSR) twenty-five years after E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley's seminal *Rethinking Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), which clearly played a role in galvanizing this new sub-field. All contributors to the volume are practitioners of CSR but demonstrate its diversity and capacity for self-criticism. This healthy attitude is quite far from the dogmatic and over-confident image with which CSR is tarnished, though it is quite clear that this image is not totally unjustified.

In the introduction, the editors argue that, at present, CSR represents the clearest example of the attempt to re-establish religious studies as a scientific-naturalistic enterprise. Nonetheless, Donald Wiebe and Luther H. Martin admit their initial scepticism, and the editors encourage an attitude that the "hard" scientific trappings of CSR should not be fetishized or accepted uncritically. This anticipates many of the contributors' concerns with losing sight of the foundational promise of CSR: to encourage collaboration and explanatory "borrowing" from cognitive science to inform, not replace, cultural analysis. In particular, the side-lining of careful historical studies of religion (as well as careful ethnographic and qualitative studies of the present), in favour of methodologically "presentist", statistical and experimental approaches ("CSR 2.0") has been identified as a recurring issue. This danger has no doubt been particularly pressing for Martin because of his pioneering application of cognitive science to the Roman Mithras cult.

E. Thomas Lawson's opening chapter reflects on the initial promise of CSR to break out of the strictly interpretive humanities' straitjacket that binds religious studies. The lack of comparative explanatory theorizing meant that fascinating questions were left unaddressed; for example, why were religious rituals preserved so carefully by participants? Why are some cultural elements generally labelled "religious" so seemingly common across cultures? Harvey Whitehouse argues that "religion" should not be treated as a singular concept because it heuristically and historically groups concepts such as deities and rituals. He compares this to the way that constellations group stars (see Richard Sosis's chapter for a critique of this

approach). Nonetheless, he also positioned himself against twentieth-century anthropological relativism and its neglect of pan-human tendencies. Uffe Schjødt and Armin Geertz point to the limitations of experimentalism—the difficulty of controlling for variables related to religion—and reassert fieldwork as the primary coalface for research on religion.

Stewart E. Guthrie states that CSR is not as unified as its proponents and critics present it to be, as it lacks a single paradigm. He uses his chapter to advance the merits of his own theory based on the ingrained cognitive tendency to anthropomorphize, to wager that an object is animate and human wherever there is ambiguity. Guthrie critiques rival cognitive theories, especially Pascal Boyer's minimal counterintuitive theory (MCI), by pointing to research which confirms that belief in disembodied agents, life after death and creationism appears to be intuitive rather than counterintuitive.

Peculiarly, Pascal Boyer and Nicolas Baumard's chapter follows, but does not address these criticisms even indirectly. They focus on the widespread differences between larger doctrinal and smaller-scale non-doctrinal "religions". The most intriguing point made in this chapter is one that many fieldworkers and CSR experiments can confirm, which is that "doctrinally correct" forms of religion may not be cognitively widespread. However, their overly rigid dichotomy (workable perhaps as a rough rule of thumb at best) is rendered particularly suspect by old-fashioned references to the axial age and the implications of a continuing "primal" layer of religion.

Panayotis Pachis and Olympia Panagiotidou critique the anti-theoretical stance of many historians, pointing to their dependence on the interpretation of often long-dead agents through universal cognitive processes, to "fill in the blanks" and to render the past intelligible to audiences. Anders Klostergaard Petersen provides very pertinent critique of the limitations of deconstructive approaches to "religion" and "magic", while also recognizing their value as part of broader scholarly endeavours. He argues that deconstructive approaches often confuse emic and etic, first-order and second-order usage of concepts, and frequently shift between a nominalist position—where words have no fixed meaning—to a realist position, for example when declaring "magic" to be inauthentic.

Leonardo Ambasciano condemns the ways in which experimental cognitivists have treated historiographical approaches as worthless ("floccinaucinihilipilification") in attempting to generalize about the past from the present by relying, for example, on statistical modelling. He lampoons this approach by discussing artist David Macaulay's book *Motel of the Mysteries* (London: Hutchinson, 1979) which is written from the perspective of future archaeologists and catalogues the religious or sacred character of banal twentieth-century buildings and artefacts. Revealingly, he mentions a tendency to rely on long-dismissed canards such as the axial age. He also argues that becoming overly reliant on "dressing up in a white coat" has encouraged confessional and theological approaches to re-enter via the back door, seeming to demonstrate the ingrained universality of religion and its social benefits.

Benson Saler and Charles A. Ziegler expand on this through a critique of "physics envy" and show how the difficulty of applying the experimental approach to broad socio-cultural contexts has not stopped CSR 2.0 from generalizing, based on very limited cases. Their key argument is that while theorizing is important, this must be constrained by the data which largely cannot be gathered using the methods of the hard sciences. They are particularly concerned to avoid the larger study of religion and culture becoming neglected by CSR; it is in danger of becoming self-contained and self-referential.

Jesper Sørensen argues that what is missing from CSR is a level of "meso" analysis between the "micro" level of individual cases and the "macro" level of grand theory, explaining the

former in terms of universal cognitive processes or tendencies. This is an attempt to better reintegrate cultural context back into CSR, by stressing that humans are not simply products of their environment but are produced in environments they have helped to form (à la Peter Berger). Specifically, cultural patterns of thought (as opposed to universal cognitive tendencies) are not purely fluid but can be stable over time and form "relatively stable feedback-loops". By way of example, he argues that apocalyptic thinking has cast a long shadow over Christian and post-Christian cultures, to the point of influencing patterns of thought outside the traditionally "religious".

Justin E. Lane points to the fact that CSR scholars differ greatly according to whether they take cognitive mechanisms or "religion" (and culture) to be their primary object of study. The former pursue an individualistic cognitive psychology of religion while the latter are engaged in the study of groups in a manner informed by cognitive science, but he asserts that there is ample room for both. Steven Hrotic roots CSR in nineteenth-century scholarship on religion, arguing that the justifiable twentieth-century backlash against the excesses of such scholarship became dogmatic and moralistic. This helps to explain the hysterical reactions to the emergence of sociobiological approaches in anthropology and, it is implied, CSR in the study of religion.

Justin L. Barrett, the father of experimental CSR, concludes the volume by stressing the need to live up to the promise of balancing cultural and cognitive approaches. He reminds readers that CSR practitioners are still engaged in social science, offering a means of explaining and modelling group-level behaviours and claims classed as "religious". He praises CSR for maintaining its plurality and the fact that a false consensus has been avoided, given the comparative infancy of the sub-field and dearth of evidence. Barrett also attempts to temper over-general and deterministic temptations within experimental CSR by highlighting the need for contextualization. Cognitive susceptibilities such as intuitive theism, for example, do not necessarily produce theists. The cross-cultural tendencies classed as "religious" appear to be natural as proclivities but, in the manner of dance or language, not so natural or universal to ever be explicable without cultural context.

All the reasons mentioned above, especially the balance between cohesion and diversity, make this book an ideal introductory reader for scholars and research students curious about CSR. It has been good to see that CSR scholars have been engaging in good faith with critical and deconstructive approaches in religious studies. It is quite widely recognized that "religion" is not a universal category, but good cases have also been made for "religion" as a useful heuristic tool for grouping research on certain cross-cultural features, which is not tantamount to recognizing "religion" as a universal, distinct domain of social life.