Review

Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe, eds, *Religion Explained? The Cognitive Science of Religion after Twenty-Five Years* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), xi + 260 pp. \$102.60 (hbk). ISBN: 978-1-35003-246-0; \$39.95 (pbk). ISBN: 978-1-35010-592-8; \$102.60 (PDF eBook). ISBN: 978-1-35003-247-7.

Reviewed by: Jennifer Larson, Kent State University, Ohio, USA
jl Larson@kent.edu

Twenty-five years after the genesis of a scientific approach to the study of religion which has come to be known as “the cognitive science of religion” (CSR), its practitioners took time to reflect on the status of the new discipline in this volume. Is it a unified enterprise? Has it set forth a productive research agenda? Have we really made any progress towards explaining religion?

Editors Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe have devoted much of their careers to the advancement of a “naturalistic” study of religion, and despite certain reservations, they consider CSR “the best available paradigm”. The title *Religion Explained?* is drawn from the fifth meeting of the International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion (IACSR); some chapters derive from that conference while others were solicited afterwards. The volume includes a dazzling array of papers by the pioneers who established the theoretical, methodological and disciplinary foundations of CSR: Justin Barrett, Pascal Boyer, Armin Geertz, Stewart Guthrie, Robert McCauley and E. Thomas Lawson, Harvey Whitehouse. Juxtaposed with these are papers by senior scholars with a substantial history of research in CSR, and the insights of junior scholars who are beginning their careers with the methods and insights of CSR already in hand.

Space forbids a detailed examination of each paper, so I will instead focus on key questions raised in the papers, which collectively form a rich dialogue about the past, present and future of CSR. How might we define “success”? According to Lawson, CSR has met the criteria for a progressive research programme by engendering new forms of inquiry, increasing our explanatory power, producing new knowledge and maintaining its core

principles (of which more below). Despite the growth of conference activity, journals and professional organizations, however, CSR has yet to become a stable discipline with institutional support, curricular presence and sustainable, diverse sources of funding (see the contributions by Steven Hrotic and Richard Sosis). McCauley praises the rapid proliferation of empirical and experimental investigations from CSR's original, primarily theoretical foundations, and lists some of CSR's most fruitful lines of inquiry, including theological incorrectness, promiscuous teleology, reasoning about dead agents' minds, the mnemonic effects of counterintuitive representations, and the role of ritual in building social cohesion. Most contributors would agree that CSR has been extraordinarily successful in stimulating new research, but there are lingering questions about "core principles" and future directions.

CSR was born as a "protest movement" (Uffe Schjødt and A. Geertz) within Religious Studies, rejecting the argument that religion is somehow immune to explanatory scrutiny, and seeking to explain why so many "religious representations" are recurrent in world cultures (Nicolas Baumard and P. Boyer). The answers were to be sought within the larger framework of evolutionary theory, such that specific religious beliefs and behaviours could be understood as adaptations, exaptations, or spandrels (by-products of traits evolved for other purposes). The spandrelist view is currently the consensus among CSR practitioners, who generally consider religious beliefs and behaviours, like many other aspects of culture, to be "parasitic" (Jesper Sørensen) on the activity of a host of discretely functioning, evolved components of our mental architecture.

The spandrelist explanatory stance is conceptually linked to the view that the proper object of study is not "religion," but its "fractionated" parts, such as anthropomorphism, ritual behaviour, and counterintuitive beliefs (Whitehouse, Barrett). Debating the boundaries of "religion" can be a dead end and a needless limitation, given that some of the phenomena we wish to study (e.g. anthropomorphism, ritual behaviour) also occur outside of "religious" contexts (faces in the clouds, diplomatic rituals). As Sørensen writes, critiquing the term "magic" gets us nowhere, if what we really want to know is "why people around the world pierce dolls in order to harm a non-present enemy". Nevertheless, definitions of the phenomena to be investigated and their variables are indispensable in a scientific endeavour, and shared definitions allow researchers to build on each others' work (Justin E. Lane). On the other side of the "defining religion" debate are those who object that practitioners of CSR continue to implicitly represent religion as a set of related phenomena, without explaining or agreeing on how they are related (Guthrie). Especially among experimental researchers, writes Guthrie, there

is often a blithe indifference to this issue, as well as related semantic/definitional problems, such as the problems inherent in the term “supernatural”. Finally, fractionation is problematic because it does not recognize that ultimately the pieces must be put back together, for the fractionated phenomena are components of systems. The interrelations between, say, ritual and supernatural agent beliefs are not arbitrary (Sosis).

Beyond the question of whether CSR’s success is predicated on defining religion, contributors to the volume offer a variety of critiques of its current state. Schjødt and Geertz assert that CSR is not sufficiently informed by current developments in behavioural psychology, that its subject pools are too Westernized and Christian, and that it pays too little attention to replication of results. Experimental approaches and religion-by-proxy studies (for example, studying hypnosis in the lab) have methodological rigour but not cultural authenticity, while experiments with actual religious practices and experiences often sacrifice control of experimental variables. None of these methods is superior to the others; instead, they are complementary. Leonardo Ambasciano notes an increasing tendency in “CSR 2.0” (the new wave of experimental, neurobiological and quantitative historical research) to dismiss the value of historiography and to fall prey to the fallacy of presentism, the anachronistic reading of the past according to presumptions about the present. Overconfidence in hypothesis-driven, quantitative research goes hand-in-hand with uncritical, naive use of historiographic sources, which are cherry-picked for confirming historical “facts”. Big data methods are no panacea. How can one build a database dealing with prehistory, for example, when so much information about the past is simply missing? Data may be skewed by coding biases, and false “signals” may be detected in what is in fact just noise. In all such endeavours, are we sufficiently alert to our strong disposition to seek confirmation, reject disconfirmation, and detect patterns where they don’t exist?

Several contributors comment on the challenges and benefits of interdisciplinarity, which offers “explanatory pluralism”, but threatens the emergent discipline with “lack of a common theoretical or methodological core” (McCauley). Training outside one’s own field is difficult, so that those with scientific backgrounds are liable to make sweeping and dubious historical claims (Benson Saler and Charles A. Ziegler, citing Ara Norenzayan’s “Big Gods” theory), while those in the humanities may apply scientific findings without a full understanding of research methods and contexts. Still, historians regularly appeal to psychological states and processes, so they will inevitably benefit from familiarity with current thinking about cognition (Panayotis Pachis and Olympia Panagiotidou), and exploration of human universals must be balanced by informed analysis of cultural particularity

(Klostergaard Petersen, Ambasciano, Lane, and others). Most contributors agree that despite the challenges of implementation, the rewards of cross-disciplinary collaboration will be enhanced rigour and explanatory power.

Another key debate has to do with how “cognitive” CSR ought to be. According to several contributors (Sosis, McCauley, Guthrie), much of the research currently conducted under the banner of CSR is not particularly cognitive; this is especially true of research which focuses on selective advantages for groups with particular religious beliefs and practices. Accordingly, Sosis suggests that IACSR change its name and become an umbrella group for those pursuing the scientific study of religion from diverse perspectives. Lane, on the other hand, argues that CSR must pursue a more “strictly cognitive” focus, namely an engagement with information theory, which can provide the cohesive theoretical basis absent in a more generalized scientific study of religion. Barrett’s concluding plea to keep CSR both “cognitive and cultural” offers a way forward: we must seek out and emphasize the links between individual psychological processes and group-level ones, for there is no such thing as a religion of one person; religious expression is cultural expression.

The one chapter lacking from this otherwise exemplary collection is a detailed consideration of newer, “4-E” approaches to cognitive theory (embodied, enacted, embedded, and extended) and how they may affect the future development of CSR. Schjødt and Geertz represent this perspective when they assert that cognition does not consist of mental representations, but is “enmeshed in somatic, emotional, social and cultural networks”. In another 25 years, while we may not have explained religion to everyone’s satisfaction, I trust that practitioners of CSR will still be engaged in vigorous debate.