BOOK REVIEW

Origins of Religion, Cognition and Culture, edited by Armin W. Geertz, Routledge, 2014. 429 pp. Hb., \$161.62 USD ISBN: 978-1-84465-701-8

Reviewed by Tomas Hampejs, Masaryk University, tomas.hampejs@gmail.com

The academic debate about religion, cognition, and culture significantly marks the contemporary cognitive science of religion (CSR) in time and scope. Although at the beginning of the field, the discussion between the respective roles of cognition and culture were marked by creating borders, over the last decade, it thrives in a more reintegrating atmosphere, of which the recent Acumen/Routledge anthology entitled *Origins of Religion, Cognition and Culture* is another significant installment. The accented strong ties of the main three topics – religion, cognition, and culture, which is an explicit hallmark of the Aarhus school in CSR, can give the impression that this book of essays could be taken as a part of the Religion, Cognition and Culture research unit's manifesto. Nevertheless, it should be read as a record of an internal debate within CSR. It provides a space for various, and not always aligning, accounts of the relationships between the phenomena behind the three categories. Twenty of the twenty-one contributions, made with a few exceptions by professional scholars of religion, trace their history to the Aarhus CSR conference held in 2006, which borders a “bringing the culture back on the stage” intra-field wave. It could be said that the scientific disentanglement of the complex relationship between cognition, culture, and religion is still at its origin, and this anthology records the search for the right questions and horizons of discussion.

The *origins* in the title echoes the general “ultimate explanation” attempts of CSR, yet it also aims for a broader approach. The book is divided into two parts: “Evolutionary scenarios” and “Cognitive theories”. The former addresses the topics of its title, although evolutionary explanation is sometimes more of a background than primary target. The latter covers critical reflexive works debating the chosen established theoretical projects themselves (usually discussing aspects of so-called “standard model of CSR”, i.e., the individualistic stressing of the causal importance of mind against causal cultural forces [4-8]). The two-dimensional structure does not fit all studies equally well, but the editor's introductory chapter provides an excellent fram-

Keywords: study of religion, cognitive science of religion, cognition, culture

ing for the broadly laid themes. Concerning the book's complex topic, it is no surprise that the real synthesis and digestion is the reader's role.

Armin Geertz's strength lies in a colorful integration of various theoretical subfields in service of explaining religion with culture on the stage. His first chapter is openly a manifesto in service of a holistic, yet naturalistic, "biocultural" picture of religion – partly discussed in polemic with cognitivist origins of CSR. He defends his position through a rich network of theories and examples discussing "how the brain constructs world." His account ranges from gene-culture coevolution, over tool usage and social cognition to placebo effects in an attempt to show that "brain and cognition developed in a dialectical relationship with culture" (18). Together with Clifford Geertz, he refuses to see "culture [...] [as] an added ingredient to an already completed animal" (22). Joseph Bulbulia continues in the second chapter by discussing the costly signaling approach to religion. His point of departure from the cognitivist account of religion focuses on the role of emotions as "signals establish[ing] a pathway to authentication" (78). In the third chapter, William Paden offers discursively provocative and inspiring connections between environmental niche construction and a "concept that has been at the heart of the history of religions field [...] sacredness" (93). He embraces the language of social status theory and evolutionarily conceptualizes "religious complexes as systemic forms of enculturated prestige" (82). Istvan Czachesz then invites readers to think about systemic aspects of the complex relationship between cognition and culture. He dives deeply into graph and systems dynamics theory and offers them as possible tools for a formalized modelling of belief-artifacts networks. His explicit focus on system theory introduces a solution for the need of a coherent analytical platform in which the cognitive and cultural data could stand together.

In the fifth chapter, about origins of art, Ellen Dissanayake describes the ability to "artify" (127), – making a common experience special – as a psychobiological human universal. She conveys these special experiences to have the adaptive function of promoting solidarity. According to Dissanayake, art demonstrates "serious regard for biologically important life concerns [i.e. long term interests]" (133). Donald Wiebe then provides a highly skeptical account of the standard model of CSR, and critiques claims concerning a sufficient explanation of religion. He encourages other complementary directions of research, while relying on David Lewis-Williams' account of Palaeolithic art to provide a focus on altered states of consciousness experience as a crucial source of supernatural imagination. Andreas Lieberoth thematically follows Wiebe with a general portrait of human creative imagination as a proximate cognitive background for belief representation and its ultimate source. Echoing Wiebe, he also calls for a focus on studying the formation of

experience, in which the brain can decouple from here and now to imaginary worlds and seamlessly couple them back. He uses interesting examples of role-playing games as demonstrations of constructive social negotiation and the function of shared imaginative experiences and offers a warning against excessive distancing between the CSR program and social constructivism (172).

Following this, three essays offer comparative evolutionary glimpses beyond the realm of the human. Luther Martin starts with an elaborative discussion of animal cultural behavior focusing on the bowerbirds' practice of nest decoration. He goes against the general ethos of the volume while explicitly aligning with those who utilize a functional cognition-culture separation (193-4). In addressing the prosocial capacity of sacrificial and reciprocal behaviors, Henrik Høgh-Olesen draws comparison between humans, primates, and monkeys in order to depict a "more balanced version of Dawkins's (1976) [selfish-gene] assumption" (215). Lastly, using a story about the deep roots of human cognition in the primate fear of snakes and the inseparability of religion and culture, Tom Sjöblom focuses on cumulative gradual processes in evolution. He takes religion as "one of manifestations of behavioral modernity," and while stressing emotional communication as a ground for symbolic behavior, he pinpoints emotional communication "as a fundamental trait [for] religious behavior" (232-233).

Several philosophical essays open the "Cognitive theories" section of the book. While still attempting to engage with an explanatory enterprise, Jeppe Sinding Jensen addresses not only the concept of culture but also the notion of meaning. In understanding religion as a program for "prescribed forms for intentionality and practice, [that is, the program of] how to think, speak and act" (253), he fiercely critiques the proposition of clear boundaries and one-way causal thinking between cognition and culture. In the next essay, which contemplates Ludwig Wittgenstein's account of religion and culture, Mark Addis remarks that "[religion] is part of a *form of life* which is based on a *world picture*" (266, emphasis added). In these Wittgensteinian terms for knowledge system scaffolding, he taps into the problem of differentiating religion and science. Within a playful reading of some theistic topoi of appearance and disappearance and child peekaboo play, Thomas Hoffman explores the Piagetian notion of object permanence and the cognitive notion of image schemas. At the end, he connects the chosen topoi to a general cognitive frame and designates "deeply embodied, experiential and developmental patterns attested in child psychology" (281) as a possible human universal for a border between the natural and supernatural. William Waldron relies on the concepts of the interdependent origins of religion, cognition, and culture painted with conceptual brushes of Yogācāra Buddhist school. He challenges

the conception of an isolated mind as an insufficient unit of analysis and calls for a systemic notion of reciprocal causality driven by action in a study of the cognition-culture continuum.

A change of tone from broad philosophical views to specific empirical and neuropsychological horizons comes with Uffe Schjoedt's recapitulation of the resource depletion model of religious cognition. His account concentrates on resource investment and motivation as important situational factors in the "complexity of supernatural representation" (307) in an explicit polemical discussion with typological models of high arousal/low frequency rituals (Lawson-McCauley, Whitehouse).

The next three chapters address tool-making and material culture. Peter Jackson deals with prehistoric archeology and raises concerns about the academic preconceptions of religion. In promotion of the bottom-up approaches, he critiques belief in supernatural attribution based just on artefact properties and calls to shift attention to the broader categories of social action. Mads Jessen then presents another explicit polemic against the mentalistic CSR, reproaching the omission of material culture (321). He proceeds from an archeological discussion to address the extra-somatics of conceptual thought. Within the case-study of the Thor's hammer Mjölnir, he shows that "the construction of (minimally) counterintuitive concepts [...] largely depends on their physical context" (334-35). A final excursion to material and tool cognition is by Pierre Liénard and Jesper Sørensen, who concentrate on cultural rituals with counterintuitive tools. In their discussion, they propose two types of possible breaches/transfers of ontological expectations, in tool design and in manipulation (non-functional action).

The last three chapters from Gretchen Koch, William McCorkle Jr., and Peter Westh return to belief cognition. In exploring the notion of the soul connected with responsibility for actions, Koch questions the simple concept of empathy as an adaptive capacity to understand the mental states of others. She stresses the usually overlooked active potential to inhibit it and claims that we may have "been designed to empathize (project) *in*accurately under certain circumstances, in order to pursue overriding interests" (365). McCorkle then discusses his account of the ritualized treatment of dead bodies. In an analysis of cognitive processes triggered by dead bodies, he explores the responsible mental systems as HADD, ToM, animacy, contagion/disgust, and person-file. However, to the standard evolutionary mechanisms, he adds personality traits (especially Big Five psychoticisms and toughmindness) as individual context dimensions, which modifies the resulting reactions. The last chapter by Peter Westh, revisits the account of the anthropomorphizing of gods concepts in Justin Barret and Frank C. Keil's narrative comprehension experiments. Westh proposes an alternative explanation to Barret and

Keil's experiment on theological correctness, in which he attributes the results to the narrative form of the experiment rather than blaming a general anthropomorphic bias. While Westh agrees with the notion in general, he stresses that "various cultural forms may act as cognitive and interactional frames favoring specific conceptual structures over others" (410).

Although the book does not offer its reader a consistent narrative like its sister publication *Mental Culture: Towards a Cognitive Science of Religion*, which shares the cognition-culture integrative aim, it is still of exceptional value to anyone who is searching for an accessible introduction to naturalistic thinking about the origins of culture and religion within the frame of cognition. In its diversity, it is not hard to find personal inspirational favorites, while the complexity of the main topic invites a comparative hypertextual reading of the chapters as a network connecting the present CSR discussion.