
Dr. Claire White’s new book is the first student ‘textbook’ in the recently emerged field known as the cognitive science of religion (CSR). As such, the book is not only a significant contribution to the field (and, by extension, the academic study of religion), but also a milestone. Though the field is relatively new, having begun in the 1990s, it has grown rapidly and widely in the last two decades, and White’s book does an excellent job of introducing readers to the field by way of its impactful scholars, its key theories, concepts, and terms, and its important empirical studies. The latter is crucial because it demonstrates that the CSR has grown into a mature scientific field supported by robust data. As such, White’s book is a valuable resource for students and scholars alike who want to learn about this fascinating approach to religion.

The book, published by Routledge, is clearly written for students, and designed for classroom use. White’s prose is clear and accessible, and she does an excellent job of explaining even the most abstract of concepts and terms. Additionally, the book is filled with numerous images, figures, tables, etc. that illustrate the concepts, as well as very helpful in-text ‘sidebar’ boxes, labeled Key Points, that are embedded throughout each chapter and summarize and formatively reinforce what was covered in the previous section. The book also includes creative active-learning classroom activities, each one labeled and numbered as a participation section, so that students can reflect on and apply what they are learning to real-world cases. Finally, at the end of each chapter, White provides a holistic summary of key points, a selected list of further readings that includes both articles and books, notes to which readers can refer for more information, and in some chapters in-depth research cases. At 333 pages (not including the glossary and index) spread over 11 chapters (including the Introduction and Conclusion), the book is thorough in its coverage. Yet, because the book is divided into relatively short chapters (most are less than 40 pages), students should be able to get through each chapter without having to ‘slog through’ or lose interest. Indeed, the book functions as a kind of ‘turn-key’ learning resource that an instructor – even with only a cursory knowledge of the field – could adopt for classroom usage with comfort and ease. I can envision it being used in a variety of classes, including introductory classes with first-year undergraduate students.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide historical introductions to the field, which began in the early 1990s when a handful of scholars like Pascal Boyer, Stewart Guthrie, E. Thomas Lawson, Robert McCauley, and Harvey Whitehouse applied theories and findings from the cognitive sciences to explain cross-culturally recurrent features
of religiosity. Since its founding, the CSR has been driven by a dissatisfaction with the standard social science model of human thought and behavior, which assumes (falsely) that the mind is a blank slate at birth and acquires all knowledge from culture. The key assumption in the CSR is that the types of concepts and behaviors that scholars categorize as religious can and should be fractionated into component parts (e.g., beliefs, rituals, morality, etc.) and then causally explained via empirically tested models of the cognitive mechanisms (e.g., heuristics and biases) involved in their production and transmission. In other words, religion is a product of the mind, not just culture, and so to understand religion, we must understand how the mind works.

Chapters 3 and 4 review key questions that have driven CSR research to date, as well as the various methods that have been used to test hypotheses. CSR scholars are interested in questions like, why do some religious ideas and behaviors persist? What kind of mind does it take to represent these ideas and behave accordingly? How does culture interact with cognition to produce religion? To test hypotheses concerning these questions, CSR scholars use a wide range of both qualitative and quantitative methods such as ethnography, text analysis, surveys, and controlled experiments in the lab and, most impactfully, in the field. Indeed, one can argue that a major contribution that CSR scholars have made to cognitive science is to show how and why we need more research in cultures that are not W.E.I.R.D. (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic). As such, the field is methodologically naturalistic, pluralistic, and interdisciplinary.

Chapters 5 – 10 review CSR on specific features of religiosity. Chapter 5 reviews the cognitive biases that help us to understand—and often misunderstand, as is the case with the widespread difficulty in understanding and believing evolutionary theory—the nature of the world (e.g., promiscuous teleology; anthropomorphism; inductive reasoning), which religious concepts exploit. This chapter may be of most interest to readers of this journal. Chapter 6 reviews research on afterlife beliefs. Chapter 7 reviews research on supernatural agent concepts. Chapter 8 reviews research on moral concepts and reasoning. Finally, Chapters 9 and 10 review research on rituals and ritualized behavior. It is noteworthy that the domain of ritual required two chapters to cover because a common critique of CSR is that it is too Eurocentric because it focuses too much on supernatural agent beliefs, which reflects a Christian bias. White’s book shows that CSR research is focused on much more than just belief in supernatural agents.

Overall, the book is well-written, accessible, and thoughtfully designed for classroom use. It is a wonderful introduction to the field.

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