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Book Review

Ilkka Pyysiäinen, *Supernatural Agents: Why We Believe in Souls, Gods, and Buddhas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 285 pp., $55.96 (cloth), ISBN: 978-0-19-538002-6.

Ilkka Pyysiäinen is regarded as one of the principal advocates of the 'standard cognitive science of religion model' (Jensen 2009: 129), and this work constitutes another impressive contribution to this new and important theoretical tradition. His objective in this rich book

> is to show that the mental representation of God and of buddhas are made possible by the same mental mechanisms that are used in representing ourselves and our fellow human beings as embodied agents… God, buddhas, and human beings are *agents* in the sense of animated organisms that have a mentality or mind. Agency thus consists of the two properties of animacy…and mentality (p. vii; emphasis original).

Part I, 'Human Agency', consists of a lucid if brief outline of Pyysiäinen's conception of agency and related concepts and introduces methodological issues. There is everything here a newcomer to this innovative perspective on religion could require for an initial orientation to Pyysiäinen's ideas. Nevertheless, readers without at least a rudimentary understanding of cognitive modularity and Dan Sperber's epidemiology of representations (1985), if not also Boyer's (2001) related, synthetic work, may have a slow go of it.

Part II, 'Supernatural Agency', addresses a number of specific phenomena from this perspective. Chapter 3 examines 'Souls, Ghosts, and Shamans'. The section on soul concepts provides a deep historical treatment of research on the topic, concluding 'that there can be no representations of supernatural agents unless there are intuitive representations of animacy and mentality ("soul" concepts)' (p. 68). This is followed by a section on souls of dead agents—ghosts. Pyysiäinen observes that 'people attribute to the dead *agentive* properties that are felt to be independent from the body' (p. 73). This is followed by a lengthy section on shamanism and possession. He considers such topics as the transformation of the shaman (pp. 79-80) in light of the cognitive psychology of concepts of metamorphosis. I took a special interest in the section concerning spirit possession, a focus of my own work. Here Pyysiäinen draws on only a few sources, concluding that 'Beliefs about spirit possession are based on the belief that agency is separable from a biological body' (p. 94). I was left with the impression that, in spite of some excellent scholarship, the cognitive scientific understanding of spirit possession is still nascent.

Chapter 4 treats 'God as Supernatural Agent', that is, the God of the 'Judeo-Christian tradition'. (For some, this term is potentially problematic.) The author demonstrates a remarkable command of Christian theology, delving into it in great

detail for such a brief chapter. This extensive treatment of Jewish and Christian theology—that is, official doctrine developed by religious specialists from these traditions—goes well beyond what is necessary to advance his cognitive argument. He devotes much less attention to non-theological conceptions of the God in the Abrahamic traditions. However, he does consider the latter, and concludes, for instance, that 'Simplified versions of official doctrines seem to live on as quotations whose real meaning people do not reflect on much in everyday thinking' (p. 136).

Chapter 5 examines 'Buddhist Supernatural Agents'. This will be quite an eye-opener for those who still insist that Buddhism does not involve supernatural beings, an argument frequently employed to attempt to refute the shortcomings of the Tylorean definition of religion. It is similar to the preceding chapter in that it delves deeply into official doctrine, and Pyysiäinen concludes that 'The official doctrine cannot penetrate everyday thinking', that is, there is a persistence of folk conceptions in the face of official doctrine which contradicts them (p. 172). Although there is much interesting discussion of Buddhist doctrine here—including some of its contradictions (namely, the question of whether a self persists across incarnations)—he makes relatively little connection to the theoretical cognitive formulations introduced earlier. As with the preceding chapter, I ended the chapter feeling that the author had delved much deeper into the official doctrine than necessary to advance his principal arguments, but I learned a great deal about Buddhism.

Chapter 6, 'Conclusion', presents a number of interesting observations. Here, differing from Pascal Boyer, one of the other principal figures of this standard cognitive science of religion model, whom he paraphrases as having said to a journalist 'that saying the world would be a better place without religion is like saying that the world would be better without gravity' (p. 186), he argues that 'Religion is a by-product of certain cognitive capacities…and one can, in principle, live without it just as one can live without an appendix' (p. 187). How does this differ from Boyer's account? Can you clarify where their difference lies? There is an interesting but brief discussion of the cognitive science basis for the possibility of secularization.

This densely argued work ends with an extensive set of appendices treating various topics. Some of this material is not so much a beginner's as higher level statements about key issues for those already familiar with the perspective, but other material is just a continuation of the argument, which might as well have been included somewhere in the body of the work. There is a brief but very useful review of dual-process theories of cognition, followed by a review of cognitive modularity, both central concepts in this standard cognitive science of religion model. Interestingly, Pyysiäinen concludes at one point that 'Whether cognitive processes really are modular in some delicate and uneasily explicated manner is of little consequence for the study of religion' (p. 196). This is followed by a sophisticated review of some epistemological issues in the study of religion which, while as impressive in its erudition as the rest of the book, I found less interesting than the other material in these appendices, including the last section, 'Religion as By-product and Sexual Selection', in which he presents a novel critique of Whitehouse's modes of religiosity theory.

Pyysiäinen's application of the lens of the cognitive science of religion to two world religions, Buddhism and Christianity, impresses one with the extraordinary diversity of religious concepts (and by extension, the practices derived from them) in contrast with the universals which are the objects of the standard cognitive science of religion model. We run head on into that classic tension of the human sciences, the universal

versus the unique. We can see human nature and the marked family resemblances in the conceptions of supernatural agents and agency between these two religions (and among many others). The extraordinary range of characteristics attributed to supernatural agents beyond what we may regard—from this perspective, at least—as essential, however, are much of what people live by, die for, and sometimes kill over. Put another way, this exciting line of investigation, exemplified by this densely argued book, throws into relief much of what is most of interest in the history and social science of religion—and perhaps shows a gap to be bridged by further advances in the cognitive science of religion.

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Mark A. Cravalho
Department of Sociology
Federal University of Bahia
markcravalho@terra.com.br