

The New Scientific Study of Religion Moving On

with Lluís Oviedo, “Challenges, Opportunities, and Suggestions for a Renewed Program in the Scientific Study of Religion”; Robert N. McCauley, “Recent Trends in the Cognitive Science of Religion: Neuroscience, Religious Experience, and the Confluence of Cognitive and Evolutionary Research”; Connor Wood, “Antistructure and the Roots of Religious Experience”; Konrad Szocik, “Critical Remarks on the Cognitive Science of Religion”; Hans Van Eyghen, “Religious Belief as Acquired Second Nature”; and Léon Turner, “Isolating the Individual: Theology, the Evolution of Religion, and the Problem of Abstract Individualism.”

CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR A RENEWED PROGRAM IN THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGION

by Lluís Oviedo 

Abstract. This is an introduction to the Symposium on “The New Scientific Study of Religion Moving On.” The introduction briefly indicates why the cognitive science of religion (CSR) needs re-evaluation. It subsequently gives an overview of the contributions of the symposium’s articles.

Keywords: cognitive science of religion; cultural evolution; religious mind; ritual; social cognition

The new scientific study of religion, and still more its best known trademark, the cognitive science of religion (CSR), has been very successful in the past twenty years as an academic endeavor aimed at better understanding religious ideas and behaviors in a naturalistic way. However, many voices have been raised in recent years showing concerns and criticisms about the endeavor, its dominant models, and its main proposals. Doubts arise at least at three levels: regarding its theoretical frameworks, which may be outdated and in need of being replaced by new views on human cognition and evolution; second, regarding the soundness of the underpinning empirical evidence, casting a shadow on several of its basic tenets; and third, philosophical concerns regarding epistemological construction and arguments. I here introduce this *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* symposium on “The New Scientific Study of Religion Moving On.” It is

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not this symposium's intention to exhaustively review the current criticisms and how to address these in the best possible way. Still, for many internal and external observers, the time seems ripe to move on and to look for an effective evolution in this academic program.

Given that the scientific study of religion based on cognitive and biological-evolutionary developments is needed, with a healthy approach to addressing issues in that intriguing field, it would be a pity if the discipline failed to evolve and the dominant models from the past decades persisted without revision, development, or progress. For that reason, *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* has invited contributions that help to clear the ground and to reveal the directions the CSR program is taking, the fields being explored or those that need further exploration, and novel theoretical grounds that could be applied in the field. For instance, there has been abundant talk in recent years on cultural-evolutionary approaches to the scientific study of religion, but to my knowledge little has been done to integrate the cognitive and cultural-evolutionary frames. Something similar can be said concerning the much-needed multidisciplinary study of emotions and their role in religious cognition. Moreover, the field of ritual studies is growing, with new entries that could provide interesting insights. And a last case is related to the study of beliefs, a busy and expanding research field that clearly interferes with the study of religious believing.

As an organizer of this symposium, in consultation with the editor, I have invited five practitioners and critics in the area of the scientific study of religion to offer perspectives and suggestions about how they represent the future in this field; what needs to be fixed or remodeled; what might help to enrich the current methodological and theoretical toolbox; and which ideas or motifs could refresh this study and update it beyond the perceived limits.

Because *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* focuses on the dialogue between science and religion, and has shown interest in and concern about developments in the scientific approach to religion, the invited authors and their reflections can help to discern to what extent their prospects and analysis impact such dialogue or could, at the least, suggest a new stance and new questions for those who engage in that interaction.

Coming to the contents of the present symposium, the first article is written by one of the most prominent founding fathers of CSR, Robert McCauley. His article engages in a well-informed defense of that academic endeavor, showing its origins and main motives, its achievements, and its promise for future developments. McCauley criticizes what he calls "protectionist" strategies at the hands of those who fear that CSR development would threaten their religious faith, and he reviews recent contributions that—in his opinion—show the vitality and expansion of this research paradigm.

The second article is written by a younger scholar who applies the CSR model in a renewed way, showing how it could be expanded. Connor Wood explores the world of religious rituals to describe and predict their social functions in an adaptive way, both providing stability and renewal. Indeed, Wood pleads for a greater integration of the cognitive and the evolutionary dimensions (an integration that has been on the move in recent years), pointing to a more convenient framework when dealing with very complex religious phenomena.

In preparing the present symposium, the editor intended to promote a healthy discussion between scholars who are defending and applying the CSR model and those who take a critical stance and advance doubts and concerns. To this second group belongs the third article, by Konrad Szocik, a young philosopher who has previously engaged in several studies showing the limits of the CSR program. In his present contribution, Szocik displays his arguments against such basic CSR tenets as the etiological reconstruction of human mind and the discussion regarding to what extent religious cognition is functional and adaptive. The highlighted flaws give place to a more pluralistic—or less reductive—methodology in the study of religion.

The next contribution—again on the critical side—is by another young scholar in the study of religion, Hans Van Eyghen, who has published extensive studies reviewing CSR. His article aims at debunking another central tenet in the CSR program: the idea that the human mind has a natural propensity to conceive and keep religious beliefs. He proposes an alternative model that relocates such ability rather to learning and cultural dispositions, a move that, in his opinion, allows for greater flexibility and enriches the spectrum in the scientific study of religion.

The last article in this collection has been added to the set after considering its opportunity and relevance for the ongoing discussion (the article had been independently submitted). Léon Turner, another expert in the scientific study of religion, directs his criticism toward the anthropological individualism that has been applied in CSR, which ignores another scientific tradition that points to a more social understanding of many cognitive processes and nonindividual personhood. His article invites a review of the entire CSR program and calls for a rethinking able to integrate the social and cultural dimension.

In all, the articles included in this symposium offer a broad panorama of the current scientific study of religion. Unfortunately, the authors have had no occasion to engage in discussion with each other—perhaps, it could be offered in a second round—and hence those who were invited to defend that model against current criticism have avoided a frontal crash, showing rather the fecundity and new possibilities opened from the original impulse known as CSR. To be fair, all the present contributions explore possible ways that clearly enrich the available methods and approaches in CSR. It

can be stated that the new scientific study of religion opened fertile ground that would be unfairly limited if the rather narrow proposals matured in the first steps in its research program were to remain unchallenged. Probably the best answer to the current criticism leveled against CSR in recent years is precisely to show that this model is much more fruitful and able to move on and to produce new and interesting research, including evolutionary cultural studies, ritual, and neurological and other frameworks. A considerable maturation can be observed today, and the field appears now much richer and full of new proposals and programs with the promising expectation that they could provide new insights and more accurate representations of how the religious mind works and how religious behavior proceeds.

A final reflection addresses the thorny issue of how the described developments might influence the dialogue between science, religion, and theology. My personal impression is that many areas of tension point to interesting explorations and views that would overcome a too reductionist stance, and open more plural and multilevel approaches. Given that the more reductive versions of CSR have been used even in attempts to debunk religious believing, it can be expected that more holistic studies, able to account for the unavoidable complexity in religious mind and behavior, could offer more interesting meeting venues for science and religion. If this trend materializes and is pursued, the new scientific study of religion will offer an excellent contribution to better stage or frame that dialogue, something that has already been attempted in some cases but that needs to be further developed and engaged with from both sides, overcoming biases and prejudices. When engaging in dialogue, indeed, no party should take "protectionist" attitudes, neither religiously inspired scholars nor those committed to the scientific method.