

The Standard Model in the Cognitive Science of Religion

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Reasons for the Standard Model

- The emergence of the Standard Model in the Cognitive Science of Religion was the result of
 - Excitement with the ideas of the cognitive revolution
 - A rejection of magic bullet approaches in the social sciences

Magic Bullet Approaches

- One factor can explain religion
 - Wrong explanations (creation stories, myths)
 - Symbolism (imagination)
 - Social glue (religion as causal)
 - Power of one group over another
 - Dreams
 - Hallucinogenic drugs (peyote, amanita muscaria, ayahuasca, LSD etc.)

- Social scientists also argued for the *autonomy* of the social sciences
 - They thought that they could explain human behavior without taking into consideration
 - Biological information especially natural selection
 - Psychological information especially mental operations

The time was ripe for new modes of
thought

The Standard Model

- At first scholars worked independently by writing books and articles
- Books
 - Rethinking Religion (1990)
 - Tradition as Truth and Communication (1992)
 - The Naturalness of Religious Ideas (1994)
 - Faces in the Clouds (1995)
 - In Gods We Trust (2002)
 - Bringing Ritual to Mind (2002)

Articles

- “Anthropomorphism in God Concepts” (1996)
- “Towards a Cognitive Science of Religion” (2000)
- “Ritual Intuitions” (2000)
- Religious thought and behavior as by-products of brain function.” (2003)
- Etc.

Interdisciplinary cooperation

- Conversation and discussion between scholars in comparative religion, history, philosophy, psychology, anthropology and biology began to take place
- First informally
- Then at workshops
- Then at conferences
- Then they began to form associations

Associations

- North American Association for the Study of Religion
- International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion

- So much for history
- Now the motivating ideas at work

The distinction between Intuitive and reflective thought

- Intuitive thought is the capacity, designed by natural selection, to quickly recognize the properties of physical biological, psychological and social things (folk physics, folk biology, folk psychology)
- Reflective thought, an important aspect of scientific thinking, is the ability to theorize about underlying and non-observable entities (atoms, DNA, mental operations etc.)

The “by-product model”

- Basic Idea: The human mind, like all human organs, is a product of the evolutionary forces of natural selection created, very slowly, in our ancestral environment (also known as EEA the environment of evolutionary adaptedness)
- These forces formed our capacities or dispositions for dealing with the world in many interesting ways
- Although our socio-cultural environment has changed these capacities remain largely the same even today

- Given these capacities, the standard model argues that religious concepts and religious behaviors are a byproduct of these ordinary capacities or dispositions

Agency

If we can, for example, detect agents we can also imagine agents with special qualities

- This is because of “decoupling”
 - I can think of you even if you are not present
 - So gods, spirits , angels, demons etc. were thought to exist even if not present or observable

CI-Agents

- This also enabled cognitive scientists to propose the concept of “minimally counter-intuitive” agents (CI-Agents)
 - i.e. They satisfy our conceptual demands because they meet most of the conditions of being an agent (with only some features going against our expectations of what an agent was like)

Basic principles of the standard model

- Minimally counter-intuitive concepts play a fundamental role in religious thought
- They inform religious ritual practice.
- Such concepts are informed by the properties of general notions such as 'person', 'living thing', and 'man-made object'.

Properties of Agents

- Some minimally counter-intuitive concepts are specifically associated with intentional agents
- Such agents are regarded as having some special, non-ordinary qualities (e.g., they may be ubiquitous, know your thoughts, and have special powers).

Rituals

- Some rituals are specifically tied to assumptions about *CI- agents* (superhuman, supernatural)
- They have an *action structure* in which *someone does something to someone or some thing*.
- They differ from other rituals because the agent acting is represented as having some *special quality* which legitimates his/her action

Contagion and Contamination

- This is also known as the awareness of contagion and pollution or contamination
- Notions such as purity and pollution are widespread cross-culturally and emerge from the ordinary capacity to be sensitive to the potential danger of harmful substances.
- So ritual protection or purification is a byproduct of our sensitivity to environmental threats which have the potential to harm us

Predation and Assault

- Ritual activity is a byproduct of such vigilance or precaution against threats to our well-being
 - Maybe if we do such and such and appeal to agents with special qualities we will make it!
- Humans' survival and reproduction is threatened by predation, assault and death hence human vigilance and the capacity to worry about threats

Hierarchy and Social Status

- Being initiated into a group by means of a set of ritual practices provides important information about social status, commitment, and proper affiliation. Such products of ritual participation provide signals or marks that show ones membership in an in-group and identify outsiders.
- Loss of status leads to threat to well-being
- Hence conformity to group norms

Moral Systems

- All human beings have moral intuitions about what is fair and what is not, what is right and what is not, what is good and what is not, and what is responsible behavior and what is not. Religious notions easily co-opt these notions of the fair, the right, and the good
- When associated with the notions of superhuman agents, they acquire a particular force because if it is good to do something, it is even better to do it if the gods know that you are doing it.
- Hence, religious moral systems are byproducts of our moral intuitions

- Questions and discussion