

The future of religion and the future of the scientific study of religion

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- The future of religion is secure
- On the basis of what we now know, the capacities that humans possess almost inevitably invite an association between the activation of those capacities and attention-grabbing religious notions with counter-intuitive qualities
- It is simply a fact that the idea of counter-intuitiveness has a mnemonic advantage in the process of cultural transmission
- This claim is not only theoretically grounded but experimentally founded

Purpose, cause and story

- Humans are a purpose seeking,
- causal inferring,
- story telling species
- and religious ideas provide those purposes, identify those ultimate causes, and suggest those attention-grabbing stories
- No other cultural set of ideas and the practices they inform has been as successful and for so long
- Particular religions come and go but new beliefs and practices quickly take their place

A suite of capacities

- In fact there are a whole suite of capacities that religious ideas can exploit
- The tendency to teleological reasoning
- The tendency to indentify agents even when they are not there
- The capacity to decouple the presence of agents from their existence
- The tendency to engage in costly displays
- The tendency to form in-group solidarity and out-group hostility
- The tendency to form stories with counter-intuitive elements and be motivated to transmit them

Attempts to eliminate religious beliefs

- Attempts to eliminate religious beliefs either by physical force, social ostracism, or intellectual analysis and critique is doomed to fail
- Because to be successful *you would have to eliminate the tendencies* listed above
 - Remember, you are still Paleolithic!
- You might be able to over-ride these tendencies to a limited extent but you will not get rid of them
- That is why scientific knowledge is so difficult to apply in every day life (See Robert McCauley, *Why is religion natural and science is not*)

Difficulties with scientific concepts

- Take for example the well-established and massively confirmed theory of evolution which sees the intricate design of the human body as the product of a long and gradual process of natural selection
- Even scientists when they describe these natural processes often employ teleological language (e.g., “The purpose of the heart is to circulate blood”)
- This tendency in children and adults is pronounced and amply confirmed by experimental studies
 - See the studies by Deb Keleman

The Scientific Study of Religion

- While the future of religion is assured, the future of the scientific study of religion is not as secure
- There are many obstacles to the scientific study of anything that has an important cultural impact
- Disciplinary resistance: Many academic disciplines are unwilling to focus upon religious beliefs and practices
- Because they simply label these as superstitions and irrational behavior that should be eliminated rather than studied
- Or because it does not fall into a neatly describable subject matter developed in a traditional discipline

Further critiques

- Ideological critique
 - Pro and con attitudes: Religion is something positive to be encouraged or religion is something negative to be regarded as an obstacle to human progress
- Political interference
 - Religion is regarded either as a set of beliefs and practices that support certain political views or an impediment that stands in the way of policy implementation
- Religious resistance
 - Interference can also come from religious hierarchies who see the scientific study of their beliefs and practices as threats to their stability

Overcoming the threats

- Despite these multiple threats to the scientific study of religion by the development of theory and the design of experiments
- As I have tried to describe in my previous presentations the cognitive and evolutionary is a progressive research program that is rich in inferential potential
- One theoretical advance leads to another and on successful experiment suggests further experiments

This is where you come in

- There is much to learn and much to be done
- You are the next generation of theoreticians and experimentalists
- A few decades ago few scientists had even considered designing experiments that could provide new, interesting and intriguing insights into the cognitive and evolutionary foundations of religious ideas and practices
- Now there are a whole set of scientists exploring these foundations in very sophisticated ways

What you can do

- You can become proficient in cognitive science
- By learning cognitive methods
- By acquiring the technical vocabulary
- By learning experimental design
 - (Study *How to design and report experiments* by Andy field and Graham Hole)

The importance of statistics

- By learning statistics
 - Essential in any science
 - Useful in everyday life
- Learn how to counter wild and outrageous claims
 - By politicians
 - By Business
 - By the media

The future of CSR

- There is little question now that CSR has made the scientific study of religion “respectable”
- But we would have done it even if it were not!
- One of the marks of respectability is when the media discover it. There certainly has been a lot of that
- More important is that established academic institutions such as the cognitive science have made room for CSR
- Universities are beginning to advertise for positions in CSR specifically
- The journal of cognition and culture frequently publishes papers on CSR

Interdisciplinarity

- CSR or SSSR will continue to follow a number of paths
- Increasing specialization focusing on specific themes and issues
- Increasing generalization focusing on relating discoveries of the specialists to the bigger picture
- Increasing cross-disciplinary cooperation on developing an explanatory understanding of religious ideas and practices

Emerging opportunities

- These appointments will be in departments for the study of religion, departments of psychology and departments of anthropology
- With the emergence of the cognitive historiography they will also take place in departments of history

Topics and themes

- Ritualization, cultural rituals and religious rituals will become even more interesting as we apply theories of precautionary psychology to specific forms of human behavior
- The study of pathologies will not only aid us in the study of normal behavior, but the study of normal behavior will help in the study of pathologies
- This already happening as psychiatrists become interested in the cognitive and evolutionary sciences

Health Sciences

- The other health sciences are already searching for clues from outside the standard sciences for techniques and methods to improve human well-being
- The training of physicians is already casting a wider net to make the healing arts and sciences more successful

Capitalism and Socialism

- Communism might be moribund but socialism is not as governments begin to recognize that equal treatment of all makes for a more productive society
- Capitalism still favors the more well-off over those less so

The clash of religions

- CSR and evolutionary psychology can have a great impact on the relationship between nation states
- Much work is being done right now on analyzing in-group solidarity and out-group hostility and developing techniques to over-ride by rigorous training the basic tendency of human beings to divide the world into insider and outsiders
- This is a tough job but scientific knowledge can make a difference – if the politicians will listen

Interesting times

- Students, you face interesting times!
- Have a good and productive life
- Be optimistic and don't let the bastards get you down!

There is more

- You can also develop your understanding of evolution
 - You don't have to read Darwin. Just read a good introductory text book. You will be amazed at how much you already know even if you have only studied humanities subjects
- Evolutionary knowledge is very relevant to understand the behavior of both yourself and others
 - It is good to know that that mind of yours has an optimal design and can do amazing things which you have just been taking for granted
 - And if you ever have children this knowledge will help you over the rough spots

And yet more

- And you can study neuroscience
- The brain is regarded by most scientists as the most complex system in the universe
- It consists of billions of neurons with even more billions of connections among them
- It is so complicated that it ultimately requires physical, chemical, biological, psychological and even social levels of analysis to even begin developing an explanatory understanding of its operations

The importance of cultural studies

- You can also become an anthropologist and study other cultures in order to ensure that you do not make your own cultural ideas the standard for human thought and behavior
- But you need to do this not to become a cultural relativist but to understand what is universal and applicable to all humans and what is local.

The role of the philosophy of science

- Or you could become a philosopher of science, while becoming proficient in any of the above scientific opportunities, because this will also give you something to philosophize about
- Philosophers of science have made an important contribution to cognitive and evolutionary science by, for example, evaluating the relationship among the sciences and pointing out how sometimes an upper level science contributes to a lower level science and how the reverse also happens
- Examples: How analysis of the cognitive processes involved in linguistic operations provides clues to neuroscientists which part of the brain to study
- And how neuroscientists studying Broca's area in the brain can suggest how linguistic processing may be affected