

# Long-lost Brothers: On the Co-histories and Interactions Between the Comparative Science of Religion and the Anthropology of Religion<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article briefly surveys and compares the histories of research in the comparative science of religion (beginning with Friedrich Max Müller) and the anthropology of religion. The article notes the close interactions between these two fields and argues that the comparative science of religion drew significant inspiration from anthropology and sociology during the twentieth century until about the 1970s when anthropology came under heavy fire from critics. The postcolonial, feminist, and postmodern wave did not have a significant impact on the comparative science of religion until the 1990s. But already during the 1980s a new approach to religion, championed by Jonathan Z. Smith, contributed to a theoretical and critical analysis of religion that neither bought into postmodernism nor into the *sui generis* approach to religion. During the 1990s, another new approach began making an impact, namely, the cognitive science of religion, championed by E. Thomas Lawson, Robert N. McCauley (both scholars of religion), and Pascal Boyer (anthropologist). The article suggests in conclusion that the two disciplines can once again meet in the growing fields of experimental anthropology and experimental science of religion and in the need to explore and address how culture affects and rewires the brain. Furthermore, evolutionary theory is also beginning to serve as a common framework for thinking about religion.

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1 This review essay was written with an anthropological audience in mind, but I hope that my argument will also be of interest to scholars of religion because it attempts to point a way forward for the scientific and analytical study of religion.

## Keywords

history of religions – comparative science of religion – anthropology of religion – cognitive science of religion – evolution – method – theory – psychology – sociology – history

## The Big-brother-little-brother Histories of Our Fields

The comparative science of religion was programmatically introduced by the German expatriate at Oxford, Friedrich Max Müller during the middle of the nineteenth century. His ambitious goal was to develop the comparative sciences of linguistics, mythology, religion, and thought. In many ways, his ambition is reflected by trends in the study of religion today, to which I will return. Müller was influenced by the times, of course, where the new comparativism was shaping all the sciences and changing the very fabric of European and American conceptions of the world.<sup>2</sup> He began a field that came to be known as *Religionswissenschaft*. It consisted of comparative histories of religions, translations, and interpretations of religious texts, and the development of theories of religious evolution and methodological debate. It was mostly promoted by orientalist and classicist. Besides Müller himself, names like Pierre D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, William Robertsen Smith, Andrew Lang, and Sir James George Frazer come to mind. A signal characteristic of the comparative science of religion is its methodological pluralism. There is no single method in that science. The methods employed by scholars of religion have been developed elsewhere: history, linguistics, archaeology, philosophy, and so on.

Towards the latter half of the nineteenth century, experimental psychology, anthropology, and sociology arose as new disciplines. It was an exciting time, fevered by evolutionary theory and cross-fertilizations between disciplines. Everyone was interested in religion and culture within an evolutionary framework. Out of the closing decades of that century strong disciplinary paradigms emerged into the early twentieth century, associated with such names as William James and Sigmund Freud in psychology, Edward B. Tylor and Franz Boas in anthropology, and Émile Durkheim and Max Weber in sociology.

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2 See Geertz, McCutcheon, and Elliot 2000; Geertz and McCutcheon 2000. For overviews of the history of the comparative science of religion or *Religionswissenschaft* — “religionsvidenskab” in Danish — see especially the loose trilogy of studies of the history of research: Waardenburg 1973–1974; Whaling 1983–1985; and Antes, Geertz, and Warne 2004.

As the evolutionary paradigm faded, the functionalist movement took over with Bronislaw Malinowski as its main proponent. In the U. S., however, during the first decades of the twentieth century, anthropology was heavily influenced by psychology and the culture-and-personality approach in the work of such scholars as Robert H. Lowie, Paul Radin, Ruth Benedict, and also psychoanalysts like Georges Devereux and Géza Róheim.

The comparative science of religion came to be dominated by psychologists and theologians with religious agendas such as Rudolf Otto, Carl G. Jung, Friedrich Heiler, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Joachim Wach, Mircea Eliade, and others.<sup>3</sup> Historians of religions retreated to an ideographic, historicist methodological paradigm, eschewing broad generalizations and especially what were perceived of as metaphysical speculations. The comparative discipline of the study of religion became the “phenomenology of religion” and was divided into two strands: the strand heavily influenced by philosophical phenomenology, i.e., Gerardus van der Leeuw, and the strand that was historical-typological, i.e., Raffaele Pettazzoni and Ugo Bianchi. The results were theoretically uninformed concepts and terms without any general framework. It was an ad hoc endeavor, “the mere multiplication of generalized cover terms,” as Clifford Geertz rightly observed in his criticism of Mircea Eliade (1968:23).

For all intents and purposes, scholars of religion looked up to anthropology and sociology, especially the former, as the big brothers of the comparative study of religion because throughout most of the twentieth century, all the main theories of religion came from those within these disciplines, such as Talcott Parsons, S. N. Eisenstadt, Edward Shils, Michael Kearney, Claude Lévi-Strauss, C. Geertz, Victor Turner, Peter Berger, Robert Bellah, Meredith B. McGuire, and Danièle Hervieu-Léger, just to name a few. With few exceptions, historians of religions were not producing interesting or useful generalizations or theories.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Even today psychologists of religion are struggling with these tendencies. The well-known empirical psychologist of religion, David M. Wulff, has recently argued that they need to start all over again (2003).

4 A singular exception is Walter Burkert who quite early on was concerned with the origins of religion in hunting rituals (1972, 1996). Philosopher René Girard introduced his mimesis hypothesis at the same time (1972), and these two scholars had an impact on the study of religion (Hamerton-Kelly 1988). Another two exceptions are the Belgian classicist Marcel Detienne (1981; Detienne and Vernant 1974) and French classicist Jean-Pierre Vernant (1962, 1965) who applied structural theory to Greek texts.

### When Big Brother Lost His Nerve

During the 1970s, however, things began to change. Anthropology still had its strong fieldwork identity, but it began losing its nerve under the assaults of feminists, philosophical hermeneutists, representatives of former colonies, and postmodern movements. Suddenly anthropology and anthropological fieldwork were reduced to mainly Western male self-representations expressing and generalizing the tropes of colonial racism and suppression. Cultural relativism, always implicit in anthropology, took over. The results were mixed: necessary foundational reflection and debate on the one hand, but rampant ethnic, genderized, ideological, and religious power struggles on the other. As C. Geertz noted, the study of human cultures are indeed constructions. What else could they be? This fact does not detract from their claims of actuality or truth (Geertz 1995:62).

The comparative study of religion was not affected by those movements until the 1990s when they became firmly entrenched in the programs of the American Academy of Religion (AAR). The AAR is the largest professional association of Religious Studies in the United States. It originally grew out of the National Association of Biblical Instructors (NABI). Their well-known critic, Toronto-based scholar and philosopher of religion, Donald Wiebe, argued that the AAR continued the religio-theological agenda of the old NABI (1999:238). By this he did not mean ecclesiastical interference in the study of religion, rather he meant the assumption that the study of religion in the university is a *sui generis* enterprise, dictated by the special status of religion (i.e., its transcendent element) in a Christian sense. Into the 1960s, religious and theological pluralism changed the narrow Christian focus to a more ecumenical one, but the real tension was between practicing and celebrating religion, on the one hand, and critically studying it, on the other. A recent Executive Director of the AAR stated specifically that it was no longer possible to assume “a clear distinction separating scholarship from advocacy” (Frisinia 1993:5; quoted in Wiebe 1999:249). The ecumenical idea of “conversation” replaced analysis, interpretation, and explanation, thus allowing fertile ground for various religious and ideological agendas.

Things have been changing, however, during the past decade or so, where new approaches and analytical groups have been manifesting themselves within the framework of the American Academy of Religion and in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*.<sup>5</sup> The fact that the AAR has become a

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5 Recent President of the AAR, Ann Taves (2010, 2011), is an excellent example of the new turn in that scholarly organization.

member of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), the only international professional organization of the comparative study of religion, is a further indication of promising developments.

In terms of the post-colonial critique, things are also changing, or perhaps they have always been like this, and we “Westerners” simply had not noticed it in the midst of all our existential agony. The postcolonial scholars I know in African and Native American studies are mostly just asking scholars, regardless of their ethnic or national backgrounds, to show respect for the people and the cultures they study, to observe ethical standards, and to do their work with the utmost scientific care and responsibility. In other words: do your job properly.<sup>6</sup> How can we disagree with that? As C. Geertz argued in his entertaining essay “Anti Anti-Relativism,” in choosing between the relativist’s worry about our provincialism and the anti-relativist’s worry about everything becoming relative and meaningless, he clearly finds “provincialism altogether the more real concern so far as what actually goes on in the world” (Geertz 1984:46).

### When Little Brother Grew Up

The postmodern tendency in American religious studies was offset by what we call the analytical turn in the study of religion, begun by Jonathan Z. Smith, professor of the history of religions in Chicago. His agenda was explicitly against the *sui generis* approach to religion, championed, among others, by his predecessor Mircea Eliade. The title of his seminal essay collection, *Map Is Not Territory* (1978), basically encapsulates his argument. Religion, he claimed, is primarily an analytical construction used to interpret certain kinds of human behavior, and it is imperative that we distinguish between construct and empirical behavior.<sup>7</sup> The analytical turn in the study of religion led to the

6 Leading names here are of course Talal Asad, David Chidester, Gerrie ter Haar, Rosalind I. J. Hackett, Tomoko Masuzawa, Jacob K. Olupona, Jan G. Platvoet, Abdulkader I. Tayob, Jace Weaver, and many others. See my contributions to the postcolonial debate and my attempts to formulate an ethnohermeneutic alternative (A. Geertz 1994a, 1994b, 2003, and 2004a).

7 Leading scholars of the analytical turn in North America were Gregory D. Alles, William Arnal, Gustavo Benavides, Willi Braun, Sam Gill, Abraham H. Khan, E. Thomas Lawson, Gary Lease, Bruce Lincoln, Luther H. Martin, Russell McCutcheon, William E. Paden, Hans H. Penner, Bryan Rennie, Benson Saler, Robert A. Segal, Ivan Strenski, and Donald Wiebe. Note that these are all men. This does not mean that women scholars were not also a part of the analytical turn. The main tradition in the analytical turn, however, was feminism, which was concerned with gender mainly inspired by French and German philosophy and various theological thinkers and in this sense was a different kind of analysis. Those feminists who

establishment of a professional association, the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR), which became affiliated to the IAHR. NAASR also founded a journal called *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* that specifically called for research on the methods, theories, concepts, and themes of the academic, comparative science of religion. The results are an array of articles and books reflecting a naturalistic, critical, and comparative study (some maintain the term “science”) of religion.

This more theoretically oriented movement resonated well with Scandinavian scholars because there already was a strong tradition, especially in Finland, of methodological reflection. Lauri Honko is the leading name in this respect because of his interdisciplinary approach combining folkloristics and fieldwork with the history of religions. He and his students have consistently discussed and published on methodology.<sup>8</sup> In Sweden, Åke Hultkrantz was also a leading spokesman of methodological reflection. Again, we witness a historian of religions who conducted anthropological fieldwork and necessarily assumed a methodological pluralism.<sup>9</sup> During recent decades, scholars in Norway have also contributed significantly to method and theory debates, such as the work of Ingvild Gilhus, Einar Thomassen, and Michael Stausberg.<sup>10</sup>

In Denmark, scholars in Aarhus have participated actively in the analytical turn.<sup>11</sup> This turn had a strong influence on interdisciplinary debate and research cooperation at the Department of the Study of Religion for several decades. Through a series of conferences, anthologies, and special issues of the Aarhus journal *Religionsvidenskabeligt Tidsskrift*, colleagues have systematically explored methodological, theoretical, and conceptual themes in relation

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identified themselves with the analytical study of religion are, among others, Rosalind I. J. Hackett, Marsha Hewitt, Morny Joy, Ursula King, and Sylvia Marcos.

8 Honko's edited volume *Science of Religion: Studies in Methodology* (1979) is an excellent example of this interest as well as his methodological work in folkloristics, such as *Tradition and Cultural Identity* (1988). Outstanding theoretically oriented Finnish scholars since Honko are Veikko Anttonen (Pyysiäinen and Anttonen 2002), Matti Kamppinen (1989), and Ilkka Pyysiäinen (2001).

9 His book in Swedish on methodology (1973) has been used in many university courses in the Nordic countries.

10 See various contributions in Kraft and Natvig 2006; Gilhus 2011; Thomassen 2007; and especially Stausberg (2009; Stausberg and Engler 2011; Kreinath, Snoek, and Stausberg 2006). There is also a growing interdisciplinary environment in Norway, seen for instance the anthology *Norges religionshistorie* (Amundsen 2005).

11 See the overview in Danish by Geertz and Jensen 2003.

to the philosophy of science.<sup>12</sup> The work of Jeppe Sinding Jensen on conceptual and theoretical problems in the comparative science of religion has been particularly useful in this respect.<sup>13</sup>

In Copenhagen and Odense, scholars have excelled in ideographic studies of particular religions, but more theoretically reflective publications have also been produced.<sup>14</sup> A younger generation has specifically identified itself with the analytical turn, but very few have found employment in the research community.<sup>15</sup> My focus is on Scandinavia, but one could easily mention theoretically oriented scholars in Britain,<sup>16</sup> the Netherlands,<sup>17</sup> Germany,<sup>18</sup> and other European countries.<sup>19</sup>

It is this general movement that most scholars outside of the field of comparative religion are unaware of. But it is imperative that they look into it — anthropologists, psychologists, historians, archaeologists, and cognitivists — if they wish to know what is at the forefront in comparative religion.<sup>20</sup>

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- 12 For instance, the problem of definitions of religion (Bilde 1991 and Geertz 1999), comparison in the study of religion (Albinus 2005; Jensen 1993; Jensen 1999; Jensen 2000; Petersen 2011; Petersen 2013; Schjødt 2008), the problem of rationality (Albinus 2010; Jensen and Martin 1997), and so on.
- 13 His book *The Study of Religion in a New Key* (2003) is a major contribution to the theoretical and philosophical aspects of the comparative study of religion.
- 14 See Olav Hammer (Hammer and Lewis 2007; Hammer and von Stuckrad 2007), Tim Jensen and Mikael Rothstein (2000), Erik Reenberg Sand and Jørgen Podemann Sørensen (1999), Tove Tybjerg (2010), and Margit Warburg (2006).
- 15 See Torben Hammersholt (2011; Hammersholt and Schaffalitzky de Muckadell 2011), Anders Lisdorf and Joel Haviv (Haviv et al. 2005), and Oluf Schönbeck (Buck et al. 1997), just to mention a few.
- 16 Such as Brian Bocking, James L. Cox, Steven Engler, Graham Harvey, Kim Knott, Michael Pye, Steven Sutcliffe, and Alan V. Williams.
- 17 Such as Gerrie ter Haar, Wouter J. Hanegraff, Willem Hofstee, Jan G. Platvoet, and Kocku von Stuckrad.
- 18 Such as Wanda Alberts, Peter Antes, Ulrich Berner, Hans Kippenberg, Christoph Kleine, and Katja Triplett.
- 19 Such as Giovanni Casadio, Aleš Chalupa, Mihály Hoppál, and Panayotis Pachis.
- 20 Strangely, many scholars who are interested in religion, but not trained in comparative religion, often begin with William James, then jump to Mircea Eliade, and from there to Pascal Boyer and Daniel Dennett!



### Will the Long-lost Brothers Meet Again?

Out of the conflict between postmodern religious studies and analytical, scientific studies appeared a completely new approach in 1990, dubbed the cognitive science of religion (CSR). It hit not only the comparative religion field, but also anthropology. And both disciplines are still punch-drunk from the collision. Suddenly there were colleagues going around claiming that they could *explain* religion through the use of scientific methodologies.<sup>21</sup>

The initial reaction to the cognitive science of religion among comparative religion scholars was a cautious skepticism. This is understandable because of the general skepticism towards the psychology of religion. Anthropologists, however, have a long tradition of studying human societies, cultures, and psyches, more specifically in the subfield of psychological anthropology. Anthropologists have also developed cognitive approaches long before the cognitive science of religion appeared on the scene in 1990. Stephen Tyler, Dan Sperber, Stewart Guthrie, Benson Saler, Dorothy Holland, and Naomi Quinn all come to mind here. It was and still is, however, a small subfield.<sup>22</sup>

In all fairness, it seems that many anthropologists (and scholars of religion) were reacting against “the-mind-as-computer-cognitivists” who rejected any cultural influence on cognition. I am critical of that approach too. In fact, the Religion, Cognition and Culture research unit (RCC) that I head explicitly offers an alternative to the so-called CRUM model (Computational-Representational Understanding of Mind), humorously labeled by philosopher Paul Thagard.<sup>23</sup>

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21 The title of one of the cognitive anthropologist Pascal Boyer's books is symptomatic: *Religion Explained* (2001). His assumptions were shared by pioneers E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley (1990) and Harvey Whitehouse (1995), cf. my introduction to the field in A. Geertz 2004b.

22 See Tyler 1969; Sperber 1974; Sperber 1982; Sperber and Wilson 1986; Guthrie 1980; Saler 2009 (collected earlier essays); Holland and Quinn 1987. Michael Lambek's recent reader in the anthropology of religion is apparently indicative of the majority of anthropologists: there is no mention of cognitive anthropology or the cognitive science of religion (2002). It should be noted that the Finnish scholar of religion, Matti Kamppinen, was one of the earliest in Scandinavia to publish on cognition (see his 1986, 1988, 1989, and 1993).

23 Thagaard 1996:10. See also his delightful book 2010. Note a few selected RCC publications: A. Geertz 2004b; A. Geertz 2010; Geertz and Jensen 2011; Jensen 2002; Jensen 2010; Martin and Sørensen 2011; and Sørensen 2007a. See also RCC confederate Ann Taves (1999, 2009).



We argue that cognition is embodied and embrained,<sup>24</sup> situated,<sup>25</sup> extended,<sup>26</sup> distributed,<sup>27</sup> materialized,<sup>28</sup> and deeply cultural.<sup>29</sup>

### Promising Avenues?

Some promising avenues where the cognitive science of religion and the anthropology of religion can meet are in the growing fields of experimental anthropology and experimental science of religion. Through the use of laboratory methods,<sup>30</sup> computer simulations,<sup>31</sup> clinical tests,<sup>32</sup> and experiments in the field, they are producing groundbreaking results, which should be of interest to all scholars of religion. Leading cognitive scientists of religion such as Scott Atran, Richard Sosis, Joe Henrich, and Ara Norenzayan have pioneered experimental approaches in the field.<sup>33</sup> A number of researchers and associates at the Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology in Oxford combine fieldwork methodology with cognitive approaches. Besides Harvey Whitehouse's work, mention can be made of Emma Cohen (2007) and Cristine H. Legare (Legare and Gelman 2008, 2009). In Aarhus, this interplay has been put into systematic focus in the context of the research coalition called *MINDLab*

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- 24 See Deacon 1997; Damasio 2000; Barslaou et al. 2003; and Barslaou et al. 2005; and Wilson 2002.
- 25 See Hutchins 1995 and Lave and Wenger 1991.
- 26 See Clark 1997; Clark 2008; and Rowlands 2003.
- 27 See Donald 1991; Donald 2001; Hutchins 1995; and Salomon 1997.
- 28 See Mithen 1996; Malafouris 2008; Malafouris 2010; Renfrew and Scarre 1998; and Renfrew, Frith and Malafouris 2009.
- 29 See Deacon 1997; Deacon 2003a; Deacon 2003b; Donald 1991; Donald 2001; and Tomasello 1999.
- 30 This is by far the most dominant approach. Here is a brief selection of studies: Barrett and Keil 1996; Barrett 2004; Bering et al. 2005; Bering 2006; McKay and Dennett 2009; McKay et al. 2011; Nielbo and Sørensen 2011; Nielbo and Sørensen 2013; Russell et al. 2011; Russell and Gobet 2012; Sibley and Bulbulia 2012; Sousa 2009; Sousa 2010; Sørensen 2007a; Sørensen 2007b; and Sørensen 2013.
- 31 See Atkinson and Bourrat 2011; Bourrat et al. 2011; Nielbo 2012; Nielbo et al. 2012; Nielbo and Sørensen 2013; Upal 2005; and Upal and Sun 2006.
- 32 See Allen et al. 2012; Ge et al. 2009; Han et al. 2007; Han et al. 2010; Jegindø et al. 2013; McNamara 2009; Schjoedt 2009; Schjoedt et al. 2008; Schjoedt et al. 2009; Schjoedt et al. 2011; and Vestergaard-Poulsen et al. 2009.
- 33 See Atran 2010; Henrich and Henrich 2007; Norenzayan and Lee 2010; and Sosis 2008. See also the work of anthropologist Tanya M. Luhmann (2000, 2011, 2012).

at Aarhus University.<sup>34</sup> Dimitris Xygalatas and William W. McCorkle, Jr. (2010) together with Aleš Chalupa (2011) have established the LEVYNA Lab in Brno dedicated to developing laboratory and fieldwork methodologies. In New Zealand, RCC confederate Joseph Bulbulia and his teams have also produced exciting work in this new field (Fischer et al. 2013).

Perhaps the new “neuroanthropology” is promising in this respect. Andreas Roepstorff and Chris Frith, however, argued that the promised methodological and conceptual synthesis offered by neuroanthropology will most likely not bridge the current divides within anthropology. (And, I would argue, other cultural sciences as well.) They suggest that the way forward is “to open up novel ways to do and think ‘experimental anthropology’, as a method, as an object of study and as a research aesthetic” (Roepstorff and Frith 2012:101).<sup>35</sup>

The most pressing challenge, I think, for all scholars of culture and religion is to take advantage of and gain influence on the growing number of empirical studies demonstrating the way that culture affects and rewires the brain.<sup>36</sup> Neurologists have already established a subdiscipline called “social cognitive and affective neuroscience,”<sup>37</sup> and, more significantly, a new field called “cultural neuroscience.”<sup>38</sup> Happy as we are that our colleagues in the neurosciences have discovered culture, happier we would be if specialists in cultural analysis played a more visible, foundational role.

## Conclusion

Interestingly, today we have come full round to issues that were current in the late nineteenth century. We are struggling once again to maintain the “science” in the comparative science of religion. We are fruitfully enmeshed in interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary, and the crucial interchange between the natural, social, and human sciences. Once again, psychology and other behavioral sciences are active, in other guises of course. There is, however, one last topic —

34 Højbjerg 2004; Højbjerg 2007; Jegindø 2012; Konvalinka et al. 2011; Xygalatas 2008; Xygalatas 2010; Xygalatas 2012; and Xygalatas et al. 2011.

35 See the special issues in *Anthropological Theory* 12(1), 2012 (Reyna 2012) and in *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 5(2–3), 2010 (Chiao 2010).

36 See, for instance, Renfrew, Frith, and Malafouris 2009; Park and Huang 2010.

37 See, for instance, Cacioppo et al. 2002; Cacioppo and Berntson 2005; and the journal by the subdiscipline’s name, *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*.

38 See Chiao 2009 and the special issue of *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* (Chiao 2010).

explicitly present in the nineteenth century — that must be mentioned before closing. And that is evolutionary theory.

Evolutionary theory was in fact present throughout the twentieth century in various shades, particularly after the discovery and development of genetics during the 1930s. Evolutionary schemas thrived in sociology, political science, and ethnography up until the middle of the twentieth century. The two world wars crippled the progressive enthusiasm that fed social Darwinism and, as already mentioned, the 1970s changed everything, evolutionary theory consequently falling to the wayside.

This did not last for long, however, for already in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the new field of evolutionary psychology entered the scene,<sup>39</sup> and, in certain cases, it was formulated explicitly as an alternative to the social sciences, in particular cultural anthropology. The most famous proponents of this alternative were anthropologist John Tooby and psychologist Leda Cosmides in their programmatic essay “The Psychological Foundations of Culture” (1992). They argued that the complexity of human life “is produced by a cognitive architecture, embodied in a physiological system, which interacts with the social and nonsocial world that surrounds it” (Tooby and Cosmides 1992:21) and that the social sciences had attempted to isolate the social from the biological and posit the “blank slate hypothesis” or the “*sui generis*” understanding of culture, from Durkheim to Kroeber, Boas, Murdock, Lowie, and C. Geertz. Tooby and Cosmides posited the Integrated Causal Model instead of the Standard Social Science Model (SSSM). Their claims, I have argued elsewhere, were in certain cases off the mark.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, they had a significant impact on the first generations of cognitive scientists of religion from the 1990s onwards.

The point here is that cognitive approaches were and still are explicitly based on evolutionary theory. But this time, scholars have much more reliable data at hand than in the late nineteenth century. The great advances in geology, biology, genetics, neurology, archaeology, ethology, and comparative psychology during the past decades have significantly changed what we know about the past and how we know it. Based on this new evidence, the cognitive science of religion has attempted to explain how religion arose and why it is still around.

The naturalistic approach to religion and to cultural and social evolution has produced important studies by scholars from a variety of disciplines. In

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39 See the excellent textbook by Dunbar et al. 2005.

40 See my essay on their misreading of C. Geertz (A. Geertz 2013). For excellent overviews of cognitive theories of the evolution of religion, see Bulbulia 2004; Bulbulia et al. 2008; Slingerland and Bulbulia 2011; and Bulbulia et al. 2013.

the cognitive science of religion, there are a number of hypotheses that have proven to be robust, such as the counterintuitive ideas hypothesis developed by Pascal Boyer (1994, 2001), the ritual competence hypothesis introduced by E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley (Lawson and McCauley 1990; McCauley and Lawson 2002), the costly signaling hypothesis developed by Bulbulia and Sosis (2011), and the modes of religiosity hypothesis developed by Harvey Whitehouse (1995, 2000). Several synthetic volumes, however, have had a much wider impact on the naturalistic study of religion. Evolutionary psychologist and neurologist Merlin Donald was one of the first in recent decades to attempt such a venture in his *Origins of the Modern Mind* (1991) and revisited in his *A Mind So Rare* (2001). Since then, anthropologist Roy Rappaport published his *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999), sociologists Jonathan Turner and Alexandra Maryanski published their *On the Origin of Societies by Natural Selection* (2008), and sociologist of religion Robert Bellah published his magnum opus *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011). All of these tomes have formulated frameworks and hypotheses to be pursued by the next generation of scholars. This is truly an exciting time and is reminiscent of the enthusiasm of the late nineteenth century. Let us hope that we have learned the lessons of that era.

A significant development is the growing interest by historians of religion to reformulate the history of religions within an evolutionary framework. Some scholars have been influenced by publications other than the above, such as the work of the German Egyptologist Jan Assman (1989, 2000) who based his work on Karl Jaspers (1949). Others have been influenced by the earlier work of S. N. Eisenstadt (1963, 1978, 1986), as evidence by the Jerusalem studies in religion and culture (Arnason et al. 2005). These developments are crucial, I think, to the future of comparative religion. As biologist David Sloan Wilson has often argued, scholars of religion are, in fact, the natural historians of religion, just like the natural historians of biology were in their field (2008:27). Like the situation was in both geology and biology, all that is needed, according to Wilson, is “the transformation of the obvious,” by which he meant the need of a theory (in this case evolutionary theory) to organize the facts that lay before us (ibid.:23).

A crucial lacuna in our current state of knowledge is systematic and easily searchable databases containing the cumulative empirical data that archaeologists, historians, linguists, ethnographers, sociologists, and many others have collected during the past few centuries. This is an immense, but highly important, job that needs to be done. Several projects are currently working on exactly that job. The first is the Vancouver based Cultural Evolution of Religion Research Consortium (CERC) that consists of an ethnographic and experimental section and a historical section. The latter consists of database approaches

to historical areas (Slingerland and Chudek 2011). Peter Turchin (2006), Harvey Whitehouse, Pieter Francois, Edward Slingerland, and Mark Collard are designing and building a database that will cover prehistorical and historical data by regions (Turchin et al. 2012). This project is related to the second historical database project headed by Harvey Whitehouse on the evolution of political systems in collaboration with Camilla Mazzucato, Quentin Atkinson, and Ian Hodder (Whitehouse et al. 2012).

On a humorous note, I would like to end this essay with C. Geertz, who wrote that “bringing so large and misshapen a camel as anthropology into psychology’s tent is going to do more to toss things around than to arrange them in order” (1997:197). But that is alright in my opinion. The cognitive science of religion and cultural psychology need tossing around. It makes sense that anthropologists with their holistic approach would make excellent contributions to social psychology and cognitive science. Cognitive scientists of religion tend to downplay culture, which I believe is a mistake. Anthropologists can demonstrate why this is so. Social psychologists are still struggling with trying to bridge the gap between sociology and psychology (Eagly and Fine 2010:313–357). Again, anthropologists and scholars of religion can help pave the way.

The challenges that lie ahead seem clear to me: we can either advance our knowledge of humanity or remain stuck in mutual incomprehensibility and interdisciplinary strife. The new generation of scholars and scientists are showing us a way forward. Perhaps the rest of us should follow their lead.

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