

Book Reviews

Mental Culture: Classical Social Theory and the Cognitive Science of Religion

Dimitris Xygalatas and William M. McCorkle Jr. (Eds.)

Acumen Publishing Ltd., 2013

The true marks of an established and progressing cognitive scientific approach to religion abound when it can not only tout achievements, but also recognize current limitations and issue calls for new directions. In this sense Xygalatas and McCorkle, the editors of *Mental Culture: Classical Social Theory and the Cognitive Science of Religion*, (borrowing language from philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn's *The structure of scientific revolutions*) say they now take the paradigm "for granted" (p.9) - albeit they also admit that it has not yet acquired the paradigmatic status of "normal science" (p.10). While Thomas Kuhn would most likely see these two admissions to be slightly at odds with one another, inasmuch as one cannot truly take "for granted" a paradigm unless they are indeed doing "normal science", Xygalatas and McCorkle's statements seem to be an indication that the cognitive science of religion (CSR) is headed in a direction that will one day enable many other scholars to take the paradigm "for granted" and find themselves in the midst of the CSR as "normal science". The editors have truly put together, to use their words, a "who's who of the field" (p.4) for *Mental Culture* with an interdisciplinary team of scholars contributing to the fourteen chapters of their book. *Mental Culture* brings 20th century thought into the 21st century. As the subtitle of the book implies, it not only situates, but also connects classical social theorists with the CSR. This brief review will consist of some chapters that stand out as particularly interesting.

The second chapter, as the editors admit, is slightly out of place in that Robert McCauley

does not aim to reconnect a past social theorist with the present. Instead, this chapter addresses criticisms present by many in Religious Studies that CSR is "reductionary" in nature with McCauley arguing for "explanatory pluralism" (p.11), construing the CSR as simply another level of analysis that can be applied in the academic study of religion. In chapter three Stewart Guthrie goes back through 400 years of "cognitivist thought" (p.33) and presents us with an argument that in many respects, puts both science and religion on an equal explanatory level. In one of the most interesting chapters (chapter four), Jason Slone "Darwinizes Karl Marx" as he writes a "lows status individual might not be using religion as an opium for escape, but rather as an aphrodisiac for attraction" (p.65). In other words, religiosity may function as an ornate display attracting mates for reproductive purposes with religion working "even if it is false, just as Marx suggested" (p.61).

In chapter eight Joseph Bulbulia, in his own words, "salvages Freud" (p.112) for the CSR and provides an interesting argument for why, as he claims, Freud thought religion was civilization's "most precious possession" (p.114). While he notes that many scholars attempt to write Freud right out of the history books, Bulbulia puts him center stage arguing that although no one should want to be a "Freudian evolutionary psychologist of religion" (p.125), Bulbulia thinks Freud has important contributions to the CSR and should not be ignored. Tanya Luhrmann builds on William James in chapter ten and attempts to shift the focus from "religious experience" as something spontaneous, to the learning processes involved in the production of such experiences and thus providing another area for the CSR to focus on and such new directions are crucial if the field is to progress. Armin Geertz conceptualizes the work of Clifford Geertz in chapter twelve in an attempt to recapture an overall Geertzian theory that includes the mind (i.e. puts cognition back into C. Geertz's work).

A. Geertz argues that the interpretation by Tooby and Cosmides has created theoretically conceptual mistakes, thus wholly misrepresenting C. Geertz, in which the structure of the original C. Geertzian theory is now lost on readers. Armin Geertz emphasizes the role of culture in cognition and outlines Clifford Geertz's contribution to the CSR.

Overall, editors Xygalatas and McCorkle of *Mental Culture*, and their interdisciplinary team of authors, bring together prior scientific thought with the current CSR in a manner that exudes their dedication to progress in the CSR field and the erudition of all scholars involved. Although the book consists of many different directions currently present in the CSR field, it is a necessary call to arms for the field to battle out a more coherent and solid research programme with greater theoretical and methodological agreement. With that in mind, the CSR will likely become what these scholars so desire – Thomas Kuhn's "normal science". This book will excite and encourage young scholars to contribute to the field of the CSR while providing new and interesting insights for more established scholars. It is a significant contribution to the field and a must read for all interested in the study of religion.

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Defining Magic: A Reader

Berndt-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg
(Eds.)

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The 'Critical Categories in the Study of Religion' series has by now established itself as an excellent source of key readings in a variety of topics. *Defining Magic* continues this praiseworthy tradition, broaching a topic which is not only highly contested within the field of religious studies, but which some might argue has no place in religious studies at all.

This work is not about the history of magic, or the theory or practice of magic; it's about an issue which has for far too long been neglected or glossed over in academic discourse—how shall we *define* 'magic' as an object of scholarly study and discussion? Berndt-Christian Otto approaches this task as a specialist in the conceptual history of magic; Michael Stausberg's expertise is in the history of religions, with a particular interest in theories of religion and ritual. Together they have assembled an interesting and useful collection of writings, and have also provided some challenging insights in their editorial material.

In their general introduction, the editors open up the whole issue of 'defining magic' by remarking that 'there is no unanimously agreed academic definition of "magic" [used by the editors throughout in quotes, to indicate the contested nature of the term], nor any shared theory or theoretical language—and apparently not even any agreement on the range or type of actions, events, thoughts or objects covered by the category' (1). A considerable semantic fuzziness exists around 'magic': different words (for example 'witchcraft' and 'sorcery') have been attached to the term throughout its history, but there is no clear usage of any of these terms. The editors argue that the problem of the 'magic-religion-science triangle' is a product of modern Western history (6), and that the Western practice of projecting the term 'magic' onto other cultures (even onto the pre-modern West), and then claiming that it explains a great deal of what goes on in these cultures, 'may, in fact, be nothing but the projection of deeply entrenched Western "modes of thought" and colonialist fantasies.' (6) This projection is evidence of 'a sometimes dramatic unawareness (or even deliberate ignorance) of the ethnocentricity of the concept of "magic" in scholarly discourse... a more thorough, interdisciplinary reflection on this topic would probably contest or entirely dismantle a major part of these "findings".' (6) This is an excellent point which deserves to be given careful attention.

The Introduction is followed by four parts. In every case the editors have selected their sources with an explicit focus on *defining* 'magic'—i.e., what it is, what its boundaries are,