

James W. Jones: Can Science Explain Religion?—The Cognitive Science Debate

Thomas J. Coleman

Review of Religious Research

The Official Journal of the Religious
Research Association

ISSN 0034-673X

Rev Relig Res

DOI 10.1007/s13644-016-0257-2



Your article is protected by copyright and all rights are held exclusively by Religious Research Association, Inc.. This e-offprint is for personal use only and shall not be self-archived in electronic repositories. If you wish to self-archive your article, please use the accepted manuscript version for posting on your own website. You may further deposit the accepted manuscript version in any repository, provided it is only made publicly available 12 months after official publication or later and provided acknowledgement is given to the original source of publication and a link is inserted to the published article on Springer's website. The link must be accompanied by the following text: "The final publication is available at link.springer.com".

James W. Jones: Can Science Explain Religion?—The Cognitive Science Debate

Oxford University Press, 2016, ISBN: 9780190249380

Thomas J. Coleman III¹

Received: 29 May 2016 / Accepted: 30 May 2016
© Religious Research Association, Inc. 2016

The duel over the rationality of religious beliefs has a deep history. Recently, “religious debunkers”, some “New Atheists,” and other skeptics, have attempted to skewer perceived religious irrationality with the findings of the cognitive sciences. In his latest book, *Can science explain religion: The cognitive science debate*, author James W. Jones doesn’t stab back at his opponents, but he does make the religious target hard to hit.

The book is structured into five chapters, intermixing research and theory from cognitive science, evolutionary theory, philosophy of science, clinical practice, and some theology. The author demonstrates to a popular lay audience, primarily religious believers, that they don’t have to discard their supernatural beliefs at the behest of particular appropriations of cognitive science of religion. The central argument is that all explanations are necessarily incomplete and therefore this provides some a priori assurance against supernatural belief ever being “explained away.”

In some chapters, religion takes a back seat to what Jones sees as a deeper, more pressing issue: “this is a book about physicalism and its discontents” (13). However, the reader should remain skeptical at any intuitions that atheism entails physicalism, although it may often do so. David Chalmers, whom Jones cites in his book, is testament to this. Chalmers is an atheist who argues that consciousness is irreducible to physical brain states. There is much to agree with in *Can Science Explain Religion*, perhaps even for the atheist—explanations are truly incomplete.

✉ Thomas J. Coleman III
Thomas-J-Coleman@mocs.utc.edu

¹ Department of Psychology, The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Chattanooga, TN, USA

In the *spirit* of Stephen Jay Gould, Jones suggests that religion is non-overlapping magisteria. He specifies that scientific measurements *are* objective; the science versus religion duel is about “background assumptions,” not “scientific data” (10). Therefore, in following other anti-positivist crusaders, Jones suggests that the personal truth of religion (or any other set of beliefs and practices) can only be evaluated by committing yourself to it and living it out. The recurring drone of this argument throughout the book is a key strength. It should resonate deeply with both religious practitioners and researchers who study them. Sometimes knowing is doing. In addition, emphasizing religion as a pragmatic collection of commitments marginalizes its doxastic components, which have been primary targets for religious debunking. But this sword cuts both ways. The “New Atheists” should be reading Jones’s book and rather than brushing it off or reacting viscerally, they ought to entertain his position. Many things involve a “leap of faith,” and if religion’s truth can only be known by practice, the New Atheists should invite the religious to take the ultimate leap of faith and commitment. Following Ryan Bell,¹ a former pastor turned atheist—try out atheism for a year.

Science may have much to say about the cognitive processes upon which beliefs are thought to operate, but taking a peek behind the curtain of the great and powerful Wizard of Oz—so to speak—isn’t reason to stop believing. Cognitive processes say nothing about the source or truth of a belief, according to Jones. A healthy dose of humility is applied by the author to the ongoing discussions between science and religion. This is a key strength of the text, but how far does this humbleness extend?

Explanatory incompleteness should give the religious little comfort. Applying this argument elsewhere, religion is just one item on a long inventory list of things science is mute on—belief in witches, fire-breathing dragons, or demon possession, etc. may be justified (or rejected) in a similar fashion. In this manner, Jones doesn’t demonstrate that religion is “special” or that it should be excluded from categories of other fantastical ideas, he only assumes it. This is one downside to the author’s uncritical use and assumption of the “comparative, world-religions perspective” (2). This perspective has been critiqued for almost 40 years for, among other things, tacitly assuming the number of adherents to a particular set of beliefs somehow reflects its legitimacy and that there is a universal core binding all belief or ritual systems (Cotter and Robertson 2016). Although Jones makes it clear that he is not taking up the point of view of any *particular* religion, the position assumed, is, nonetheless, somewhat Protestantly minded. According to Jones, science only explains how our mind works when thinking about entities such as gods—but add to this witches, Joseph Smith’s “seer stones,” or whether or not an individual is possessed by demons or just suffering from the late stages of syphilis. Aside from syphilis, science can’t speak to the truth value of these other seemingly immaterial engagements.

The attempt at “debunking the debunkers” (12) is on safer ground when he rebukes certain models of the mind conceptualized as *rigid* collections of modules with belief forming mechanisms shaped *solely* by evolutionary pressures, cranking

¹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/yearwithoutgod/>.

out god beliefs like a slot machine—end of the story (see chapters 1 and 2). Jones doesn't really need to make these arguments to protect religious belief from scientific critique. His strongest point is that all explanations are necessarily incomplete, don't give up belief in witch craft, fire-breathing dragons, or God just yet.

Reference

Cotter, Christopher, and David Robertson. 2016. *After world religions: Reconstructing religious studies*. New York: Routledge.