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# Introductory Remarks to the Topical Issue “Cognitive Science of Religion”

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In the last couple of decades, the cognitive science of religion (CSR) has become a major area within the scientific study of religion. According to this approach, if we want to understand religion—and specifically why human beings tend to be religious—then in addition to doing what traditional scholars of religion do, we also need to think about the role of human cognition. The main reason for this, given a CSR framework, concerns human nature: human minds possess information processing tendencies that very often generate beliefs in supernatural agents,<sup>1</sup> design,<sup>2</sup> purpose<sup>3</sup>, and, more controversially, mind-body dualism.<sup>4</sup> Where these tendencies are developmentally constrained, this often constrains which beliefs are formed.<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that everyone will develop the *same* religious concepts or that environment is irrelevant to the formation of our concepts. Religion is a diverse and complex animal and it is well known that the particulars of people’s environments matter greatly to the formation of their religious concepts, outlooks, and practices. The idea is rather that in fairly diverse environments, various cognitive structures, habits, and abilities naturally generate the kinds of beliefs<sup>6</sup> just mentioned.

To consider one example, although different groups affirm spirits with different names or histories, a belief in disembodied spirits is itself quite widespread across cultures and times. CSR seeks to address why this is so. Some authors stress evolutionary considerations: perhaps a belief in monitoring spirits helped to generate pro-social tendencies among our ancestors, which in turn helped to promote survival and reproduction. Other authors, perhaps the majority of them, claim that our human tendency to affirm spirits stems from mental capacities, such as our capacity to detect agents<sup>7</sup> and our capacity to read minds, that evolved in response to non-religious challenges. Still others claim that a belief in spirits might both be adaptive and a cognitive by-product.

Many will find CSR interesting in its own right, at a purely scientific level. But for some what is most interesting about CSR has to do with its potential implications for religious believers.<sup>8</sup> One common question here is whether the main theories in CSR, if true, would undermine the rationality of various religious beliefs. For instance, it would be hard to explain why people believe in the existence of water without making appeal to the existence of water in one’s explanation. But many think that CSR can explain why people believe in the existence of spirits without making appeal to the existence of spirits. Might

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1 Barrett, *Born Believers*; Baumard and Boyer, “Religious Beliefs.”

2 Kelemen, “Are Children ‘Intuitive Theists’?”

3 Bering, “The Existential Theory of Mind.”

4 Cohen, Burdett, Knight, and Barrett, “Cross-Cultural Similarities.”

5 Norenzayan, Gervais, and Trzesniewski, “Mentalizing Deficits.”

6 To be sure, some authors focus more on practice and ritual than belief, but many focus on religious belief. In addition, most authors focus on religions with gods or spirits on the grounds that most religious traditions involve such agents.

7 Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds*.

8 Trigg and Barrett, *Roots of Religion*.

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such a claim, if true, pose an epistemological challenge to a belief in spirits? Or would such a ‘debunking’ challenge inevitably be question-begging to religious persons or face some other kind of problem?<sup>9</sup>

Some of the articles in this special issue address these kinds of philosophical questions. Others are more empirical, focusing on ways to expand CSR into new territory; still others are more theological, historical, or methodological in character. In all cases difficult, important, and exciting questions about scientific, philosophical, or theological dimensions of CSR are addressed. I am happy to see a venue like *Open Theology*, which permits not only a diversity of approaches to these topics, but which further makes diverse scholarship accessible to anyone with internet access.

## References

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<sup>9</sup> Some think the debunking challenge in question would amount to an unwanted recipe for skepticism since one could also explain many beliefs, say about morality and maybe even mathematics, without making appeal to their truth. Given the complexity of these matters, there is currently little consensus about what, if any, implications CSR has for the epistemology of religious belief. But not all challenges that arise from CSR take the form of debunking challenges, as shall become clear in this special issue. Also see Marsh and Marsh, “The Explanatory Challenge of Religious Diversity.”