Book Review


In this excellent book, McCauley and Graham (2020) intertwine ‘features of experiences and behaviors associated with particular mental disorders and features of experiences and behaviors associated with religiosity.’ (p. 3) The authors’ overall argument is that, in the study of religion, cognitive science and psychopathology are mutually informative. A further important disclaimer is that what’s religious and what’s deviant is culturally appropriated (cf. page 49). We say ‘disclaimer’ because it might appear from the outset that the authors suggest religiosity is pathological. The methodological fundamnet is that the cognitive science of religion’s successes at explaining relevant features of the kinds of experiences in question that are construed religiously suggests that it may offer useful resources for gaining some explanatory purchase on those that are construed as the results of mental disorders as well. (p. 6) McCauley and Graham frame the discussion in the context of stalwart themes in the CSR, such as the hyperactivity of a hypersensitive agency detection device (HADD) (Barrett, 2004); theory of mind (ToM) (Boyer, 2001); existential meaning-making anxiety (Bering, 2002); counterintuitive properties of supernatural agents and cultural narratives (see Norenzayan et al., 2006); intuitive and reflective thinking—‘intuitive’ being synonymous with the naturalness of religious ideas put forward by McCauley in previous work (McCauley, 2011), and the relation between contamination avoidance and religious scrupulosity (Ch. 4). These are in turn connected to religious experiences and behaviors which bear resemblance to neuropsychiatric conditions, such as schizophrenia, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), and depression.

In Chapter 5, the authors have a somewhat different mission, which is to present the case of autism as one which may not align well with religiosity. This chapter can be read as a defense of the ‘naturalness hypothesis of reli-
gion’ which suggests that the human capacity for theory of mind (ToM), which denotes the ability to understand what others think, want or intend, is crucial for intuitive reasoning about supernatural minds. Despite the prospective examination of how ToM-abilities influence religiosity, it is somewhat problematic to add autism to a book on psychiatric illnesses which, as the authors note, often cause suffering. Autism is no such illness, but rather an alternative cognitive style which only causes suffering if the surrounding world is poorly adapted to autistic needs (see Visuri, 2019). There is also a potential danger in how thinkers like McCauley (2011) and Barrett (2004, 2012) treat the autistic ‘unnaturalness’ of atheism (see Atkinson, 2020), as such terms might be taken up by individuals outside academia set to discuss the roles of autistic individuals, atheists, and theists alike in wider society after having read these kinds of treatment. It is however positive to see that McCauley and Graham also illustrate the religiosity of autistic individuals in various cultural settings, while simultaneously arguing that autistic individuals will have difficulty with theistic cognition beyond a compulsive attraction to the repetitivity of religious rituals (p. 143).

By no means, do the authors hold that CSR has the monopoly on explaining religiosity or mental illness, maintaining (p. 10) an ‘explanatory pluralism’ which, convolved with what they term an ‘ecumenical naturalism’ (Ch. 6), conspires to provide interdisciplinary explanantia of the origins of both. Sensing the impending doom of thinking which is antithetical to this kind of pluralism, the lover of wisdom is called on to embrace ‘philosophical naturalism’—the view that “scholars of religious studies, philosophers, and humanists, more generally, [should] exhibit a healthy respect for the methods and findings of the empirical sciences, especially when their proposals or theories address the same domains those sciences do.” (p. 10) The crux of the argument about the relationship between ordinary cognitive capacities, religiosity, and mental illness appears to be this: “Normal cognitive dispositions or systems work in concert both to keep tales of conversing with God rolling and to ensure that they are intelligible or understandable” (p. 68), but,

1 It should not escape the authors’ attention that the notion of autistic atheism appears at https://www.conservapedia.com/Atheism_and_autism and there appears to have been some outrage in Turkey on the matter: https://www.hurriyetedailynews.com/likening-of-autistic-kids-to-atheists-causes-fury-45390.

2 Language processing, agency detection, theory of mind, and a penchant for narrative etc. (pp. 54–69).
“if deprived [...] [of one or another core cognitive capacity] the disposition to narrativity will likely be without a coherent or consistent center of narrative gravity. It may also be that in some cases there is an ongoing interaction between compromised and uncompromised systems or between impaired and unimpaired automatic dispositions, thus creating symptomatic instability or fluctuation in disturbance.”

p. 69

Deprivation of cognitive function is essentially the flipside of variation in the hardware. Other kinds of variation in that hardware the authors are keen to address concern those at the seat of obsessive compulsive disorders such that religious representations are seen to “elicit responses in participants that simulate features of OCD” (p. 137). The cognitive apparatus engaged which, given some variation (Wlodarski and Pearce, 2016), gives rise to, say, a hyper-religiosity pathological or culturally normal, are also adaptations which have enabled Homo sapiens to survive the test of evolutionary time—e.g. the habitual ruminations of the religious concerned not to be contaminated with sin and concomitant ritual behavior (pp. 143–149), likely employs the same cognitive apparatus which intuitively has us avoid biological contamination from foreign pathogens and rotten food.

What appears to be quite different about the book is a sensitivity to the cultural/individual appropriation of the kinds of experiences in question (pp. 5, 31)—indeed, that sensitivity bridges the gap between what is potentially deemed to be of religious significance, and what is strictly pathological (p. 49). What is appropriated as mental illness or religious, is culturally specific, and for the authors, this is reflected in the fact that “people with schizophrenia often fare better, overall, in many of the cultures of the developing world compared with how such people fare in the developed world. The cultural dimension of particular interest here is, of course, religion” (p. 44)—religions being more dominant in developing countries (see Norenzayan, 2013, Ch. 10) Arguably then, the authors are arriving at an appreciation of the confluence of cultural evolution throughout religious history, and the co-evolution of its cognitive terrain.

And what is the upshot for the relationship between mental illness and religion? Are the religious actually mentally ill? Of course not, and nor are all atheists. However, extreme forms of religiosity should indeed be of concern in light of the above (e.g. pg 52)—if God’s will appears parallel to the selfish interests of his vehicle, then this should arouse our just suspicions. In turn, militant forms of atheism also require a dose of the philosophical naturalism that the authors prescribe. It will not do to wage diagnostic warfare with ‘the other
camp’ as being bunches of schizophrenics or autists. What is more, the cognitive apparatus engaged which, allowing for some hardware variation (Wlo-darski and Pearce, 2016), gives rise to hyper-religiosity and mental illness, are also adaptations which have enabled Homo sapiens to survive the test of evolutionary time—e.g. the habitual ruminations of the religious concerned not to be contaminated with sin and concomitant ritual behavior, likely employs the same cognitive apparatus which intuitively has us avoid biological contamination from pathogens and rotten food, and is likely the origins of moral disgust and some conflict between religious outgroups (pp.143–149). Therefore, it seems cognitive adaptations which enable us to survive come saddled with the potential for pathological mental states—because they vary in functionality.

One possible criticism is that the authors state that: “One of the most active topics in cognitive science of religions concerns the role of cultural evolution in the origin and prevalence of the assumption or idea of God making moral or ethically evaluative judgments about human beings” (p. 91). However, the cognitive science of religion has, since its advent, shown a certain paucity in the employment of theories of cultural evolution. There is little or no discussion of theories of cultural evolution in this book, and the term ‘cultural evolution’ is only mentioned once more within it (p. 149). One might, as does Boyer (2001), mention the cultural flow of memetic replicators in explaining religion and move beyond the confines of the confines of the by-product view of religion (see p. 5) onto exaptations and cultural group selection (Handley and Mathew, 2020). However, in previous academic climates (and perhaps particularly so in CSR circles) talk of cultural evolution has not been without risk of being met with derision. Moreover, fully engaging with cultural evolution is not the purpose of the book and it achieves what it sets out to do—to show what psychopathology and cognitive science can teach us about religion. Theists will find much of use in the book to ground intuitions about the naturalness of religion. The secular scholar might well find a few missing links needed to account for why, in an atheistic universe, the vast majority of humanity manages to create God-concepts without significant sensory input. A wish for future work is that adverse and normative labels such as ‘cognitive impairments’ are abandoned as certain individuals may want to read good scholarly work without feeling debased. However, the social appropriation of terms is not the authors’ concern, whereas they are indeed broadly sensitive to the fact that one man’s madness is another man’s divinity. Any scholar of religion is undoubtedly going to make the book core reading. It is concise, well executed, and a masterly handling of both philosophy, and science.
Andrew Atkinson
Institute of Philosophy, Society & Cognition Unit, University of Białystok,
Białystok, Poland
logistikon@protonmail.com

Ingela Visuri
Dalarna University, Falun, Dalarna, Sweden
ivi@du.se

Works Cited