CHAPTER ONE

THE COGNITIVE APPROACH TO CHARISMA

This study diverges from much of the earlier scholarly work on new religious movements in that it approaches the subject matter from the viewpoint of cognitive science of religion. This is a relatively new field within the broader field of the academic study of religion and it has not yet made much of an impact on many traditional subject areas within that field. Because the field has only emerged in the last couple of decades, it is not surprising that studies of this kind are still very rare. This chapter will therefore begin with an introduction to the basic tenets of the cognitive approach to religion before proceeding to examine the cognitive approach to charisma.

Traditionally, those who are believed to be endowed with special religious powers have been discussed under the rubric of 'charisma'. By critically examining some of the previous theories and conceptualisations of charisma, I intend to show how the cognitive approach can help to improve on the previous attempts to explain the phenomenon of charismatic leadership. Towards the end of this chapter the cognitive approach to both religious social categorisation and the dynamics of religious systems is explored in more depth. In this way, by linking cognitive concepts to previous theories, I hope to demonstrate how the cognitive approach will be able to enrich and strengthen our overall theoretical grasp of the phenomenon of charisma on both psychological and sociological levels.

What Is Cognitive Science of Religion?

The cognitive science of religion was born with the publication of several seminal works in the early 1990s. Especially three independently conceived but equally groundbreaking books merit mention here: The first one was Rethinking Religion (1990) by the religious scholar E. Thomas Lawson and the philosopher Robert N. McCauley, the second was Faces in the Clouds (1993) by the anthropologist Stewart Guthrie, and the third was The Naturalness of Religious Ideas (1994) by the cognitive scientist Pascal Boyer. Each of these works set out to chart, in a
principled manner, a completely new approach to studying religion. Despite their differences, these works had so much common ground that collaboration soon developed among these scholars and a new field of study to coalesce around these ideas. Today there exist already several quite approachable introductions to the field (e.g. Boyer 2001; Barrett 2004; Slone 2004; Tremlin 2006).

The field did not emerge from a complete void, however. Already in 1975 the French anthropologist Dan Sperber had published his book *Rethinking Symbolism*, which to a large extent laid the foundations for a cognitive approach to cultural systems and influenced both Boyer’s and Lawson and McCauley’s work. Guthrie had also already published an article already in 1980 in which he proposed a cognitive approach to religion and that our biological intuitions could be used to explain animism and anthropomorphism.

The distinctive and common thesis evinced in all these works was that knowledge about ordinary human cognitive mechanisms together with inputs from ordinary environment goes a long way towards explaining religion. It was this “naturalness-of-religion thesis” that provided the common insight and strategy for a new research programme (Barrett 2000). The strategy suggests that the seemingly extraordinary cultural ideas and behaviours found in religion can be explained by entirely ordinary cognitive processes and mechanisms that the cognitive sciences have been able to elucidate.

This thesis of naturalness may sound strange to both laypersons and scholars of religion who commonly perceive religious beliefs and behaviours in terms of their exotic and extraordinary properties. The field of psychology of religion was for a long time occupied exclusively in a search for special “religious” or “mystical” experiences and many in the field still think that religion has its roots in these more uncommon experiences (e.g. Newberg, d’Aquili and Rause 2001). The cognitive science of religion proposes, however, that such experiences are of little help in understanding the more commonly found religious expressions used by the majority of people. As Boyer (2001, 310) puts it: “Even if prophets were the main sources of new religious information, that information would still require ordinary nonprophets’ minds to turn into some particular form of religion.”

The argument behind this naturalness-of-religion thesis involves several distinct claims. First of all, as Boyer (1994) emphasises, it involves a recognition that a number of religious representations recur in many different cultures. For instance, in many cultural environments it is