Western Esotericism and Cognitive Science of Religion

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1 Introduction: Cognitive Science of Religion and Western Esotericism

Why would cognitive science be relevant for history of religion or historiography in general and the study of western esotericism in particular? Two problems initially materialize when addressing this question. The first pertains to the concrete material analyzed by the historian and the relation between synchronic and diachronic analysis. Cognitive science studies the mechanisms of the human mind, so why can theories and models from this field possibly help the historian establish diachronic relations between discrete ideas and persons, and aid the analysis of mind-external material (texts and other material artifacts)? The second problem pertains to the relation between the particular and the universal. Studies of western esotericism aim at eliciting a particular and rather unique range of ideas allegedly constituting a countercultural (European) tradition. That is, it aims to understand something that is particular, whereas cognitive science is preoccupied with unraveling what is universally human. The question is, how theories and approaches aimed at the universal can enlighten the study of the particular without thereby eradicating the very uniqueness used to establish the field of inquiry in the first place.

These two problems reveal a tension between a nomothetic approach that is inherently universalistic and synchronic in its attempt to explain general
features of the human mind and an ideographic approach seeking to interpret the diachronic unfolding of particular and historically embedded discursive universes. Much ink has been spent on this question¹ and I shall not enter into this essentially epistemological discussion at length here. A few general observations are needed, however, before going into a more focused discussion of each of the three articles at hand.²

First off it must be emphasized, that all historical studies—not only those drawing on the cognitive science of religion—are built upon more or less implicit assumptions of how the human mind works. In fact, all studies that aim to fully describe, interpret, or explain any delineated range of human behavior, or their products, are necessarily informed by psychological models (as well as sociological models, but that is a far less contentious issue). For example, the insistence that human agency ultimately underlies historical events is exactly what distinguishes historiography from natural history. More to the point, any attempt to understand or explain patterns of transmission of ideas over time must necessarily build upon one or more models specifying the boundary conditions or constraints of such transmission imposed by human cognitive architecture.³ Furthermore, studies addressing the diffusion of particular types of ideas within a given population build upon assumptions pertaining to psychologically relevant features such as memorability, complexity, and the experiential dimension of the ideas transmitted, as well as the receivers’ (implicit) representations of the relative credibility of the person from which any given information is obtained. Thus, not all ideas are equally well transmitted, and their success to a large extent depends on how the concept is constructed as well as representations about their source, all aspects that points to psychological mechanisms.

Unfortunately, the inevitability of some degree of psychological modeling is seldom recognized within historical studies of religion, even if this deplorable situation is being amended in some recent studies and in a new dedicated journal.⁴ Thus, the decision by Aries to dedicate a special issue to investigate

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¹ On the relation between nomothetic and ideographic approaches in the study of religion, see Jensen, The Study of Religion in a New Key.
² For a more thorough discussion of the relation between psychological, sociological and historical explanations, see Sørensen, ‘Past Minds’.
³ Heintz, ‘Cognitive History and Cultural Epidemiology’.
⁴ E.g., Whitehouse and Martin (eds.), Theorizing Religions Past, Martin and Sørensen (eds.), Past Minds; Journal of Cognitive Historiography. Recently, a number of “grand theories” have appeared that integrate evolutionary and cognitive theorizing with historiography. See, for instance, Bellah, Religion in Human Evolution; Norenzayan, Big Gods.