Editors’ Introduction

What Cognitive Science Offers the Study of Esotericism

Egil Asprem
Stockholm University
egil.asprem@rel.su.se

Markus Altena Davidsen
Leiden University
m.davidsen@hum.leidenuniv.nl

1 Introducing the Cognitive Science of Religion to the Study of Esotericism

In tandem with the professionalization of research on esotericism over the past two decades, another sub-discipline has risen to prominence within the study of religion: the cognitive science of religion (CSR). Both of these fields, CSR and the study of esotericism, have made significant impact on how we study religion. Research on esotericism, as Aries readers well know, has deepened our understanding of the historical complexities of religion and its others in the West (the European countries and their spheres of influence), identifying blind spots relating to heterodox religion, radically experiential practices, and overlaps between “religion”, “magic”, and “science” that may look curious with the hindsight of history. Meanwhile, CSR is changing the way scholars think about and approach key aspects of religious thought and practice while adding new experimental and analytical tools to the scholar’s toolbox, by grounding the study of religion in our best current theories of how the human mind works. This special issue is the first collaborative attempt to date at exploring the potential of bringing these two innovative fields together. Two questions motivate this endeavour. First, what can CSR approaches add to the study of empirical material from the field of esotericism? Secondly, and conversely, can

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1 For a fairly up to date overview of the CSR field, see Pyysiäinen, ‘Cognitive Science of Religion’.
key problems in the study of esotericism, such as the notion of experiential *gnosis*, correspondence thinking, the role of imagination, and the use of esoteric hermeneutical strategies applied to obscure texts contribute to the development of CSR approaches?

Our main ambition, however, is to introduce CSR to readers of *Aries* and to demonstrate that CSR’s style of approaching research questions can be useful to scholars working with historical sources. One challenge is that CSR has primarily been developed by anthropologists and psychologists, with attempts at building a cognitive historiography of religion being of more recent vintage. Moreover, there are many examples of researchers in disciplines like cognitive anthropology, psychology, and linguistics doing useful work on religion without situating themselves within CSR in the narrow sense. Our authors have therefore been instructed to introduce the key concepts and theories they use in an accessible manner that makes different research traditions visible to readers, and, more importantly, to highlight what their adopted perspective allows historians of esotericism to do that they are not doing already.

Before we introduce the topics that these articles raise, it might be useful to first address a more basic question: What is CSR, anyway? What are its goals, which methods does it favour, and what are its theoretical assumptions?

The basic assumption of CSR is that religion cannot be understood in historical and social terms alone, but must be grounded in the ultimately biological constraints that apply to all of human thought and behaviour. Classic areas of inquiry such as religious experience, the persistence of religious beliefs, and the cross-cultural ubiquity of ritualisation can only be explained if historical and sociological models are complemented by, and rooted in, what we know about human cognition. CSR is therefore an interdisciplinary endeavour that seeks to address questions originating in the anthropology, sociology, and history of religion from the perspective of what is collectively known as the cognitive sciences.

Cognitive science is itself a complex research tradition, spanning psychology (especially evolutionary, developmental, and social psychology), linguistics, anthropology, neuroscience, artificial intelligence, robotics, and the phi-

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4 Examples include Tanya Luhrmann (anthropology, e.g., *When God Talks Back*), Miguel Farias and Pehr Granqvist (psychology; e.g., ‘The Psychology of the New Age’), and Zoltán Kövecses (linguistics; e.g., ‘The Biblical Story Retold’).