Ilkka Pyysiäinen

For scholars interested in the study of religion, the question of why supernatural agents are so widespread throughout the world is a primary question. Cognitive psychology offers a powerful explanatory framework for this facet of religious belief. Pyysiäinen’s *Supernatural Agents* offers a detailed account of those aspects of human cognition that allow humans to contrive and adopt beliefs about supernatural agents and presents previous research in a way that is accessible to scholars of religion who may be unfamiliar with the experimental literature. It is careful and thorough at all times, and a point is made not to dismiss religious beliefs as hallucinations or anomalous, but rather to show that natural psychological mechanisms underpin the spread of supernatural agents and related representations.

Pyysiäinen begins by focusing primarily on the way in which people conceive of human agency. He presents those aspects of human cognition that support beliefs in supernatural agents. His strongest point is that naturally occurring cognitive mechanisms underpin the way in which beliefs of supernatural agency become distributed through populations. The strength of this argument is that the theories that Pyysiäinen draws from make clear predictions (not just post hoc interpretations) that can be empirically traceable. This provides the framework for understanding the cross-cultural recurrence of supernatural agents and provides a foundation for comparison that has long been sought in comparative studies of religion (for example, see discussion in Paden, 2010).

Pyysiäinen proposes that religious beliefs spread from person to person. He provides a concise overview of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1995), which blends Shannon’s (1948) informatics approach to communication with “cultural epidemiology”; this is the idea that cultural ideas spread from person to person like viruses (see Sperber, 1985). Shannon proposed that for
communication to take place there must be a sender, a receiver, and some signal which is encoded by a sender and decoded by a receiver. A general example of this would be a person (sender) speaking (the encoding) to another person (the receiver). The linguistic signals are encoded and decoded by the people in conversation. Sperber and Wilson added that successful communication is achieved only if the signal is deemed relevant, and outline the conditions for relevance at length. However, Pyysiäinen notes that social transmission patterns are only part of the story. How beliefs in non-natural agents are supported in our mind is of primary concern, the transmission of such beliefs is secondary. Indeed, how could one transmit a belief that can't be supported cognitively? To explain the generation of supernatural agent concepts, Pyysiäinen concentrates on three cognitive proclivities: hyperactive agency detection, which leads humans to postulate animacy even in its absence; hyperactive understanding of intentionality, which leads to beliefs of intentionality even in its absence; and hyperactive teleofunctional reasoning; which leads humans to promiscuously find purpose and reason even in its absence.

One of the primary values of the book is the application of the principles of human cognition to the understanding of “Souls, Ghosts, and Shamans” (the title of chapter 3). Pyysiäinen goes to great length to provide psychological treatments of supernatural agents without straying far from the subtle attention to detail that is typical of high quality scholarship in the field of religious studies. He also addresses Judeo-Christian concepts of God as well as concepts of demons, which are all-too-often overlooked as supernatural agents in studies of Christianity. He also provides an extensive discussion of Buddhist supernatural agents. Pyysiäinen directly addresses the misconception that Buddhists have no deities. His discussion relies upon the empirical foundation outlined in earlier chapters and demonstrations that Buddhism does have supernatural agents that rely upon the same cognitive mechanisms as other supernatural agents. He draws a useful distinction between what theologians prescribe and what people generally believe and do (also noted by Sloan, 2004). In so doing, he provides a useful framework for revisiting questions about agents such as Santa, which have been largely dismissed as non-gods on theological grounds (see Barrett, 2008) or extra-terrestrial entities, which have been overlooked in CSR, likely due to their cultural “exoticism”. This provides a thought provoking idea: perhaps scholars of religion should not make claims about “gods” as if some gods are more “god-like” than others. Rather, one should simply utilize empirically useful formalisms to describe gods based on their attributes and ritual competencies. Furthermore, we should not discriminate our target of research based on exoticism or other cultural biases (such as