BOOK REVIEWS


The cognitive study of religious symbolism aims to develop a naturalist psychology of religion by applying developments in the cognitive sciences, and more in particular in cognitive psychology and anthropology—which study how humans learn the concepts they need in daily social life, and acquire proficiency in their use—to the study of how religious concepts are transmitted, learned, and properly used; and *vice versa* to contribute to the development of the young cognitive sciences by the study of religious symbols as a special domain unconstrained by practical constraints (43). Cognitive anthropology of religion aims to 'explain the recurrent properties of religious symbolism' by studying the rules preprogrammed in our minds which constrain the transmission, acquisition, and proficient use in daily life of the mental representations and processes involved in religious beliefs, discourse and behaviour (4).

The volume has four parts. The first has two papers which place this approach in the wider framework of anthropology: one by Boyer on the special marks of the cognitive approach to religious symbolism compared to earlier approaches which did not take the universal constraints upon human cognition into account (4-47); and one by Scott Atran on the defective contribution of earlier 'ethnosemantics', the study of category formation in traditional societies, and how to improve upon it (48-70). Part two, on religious categories being structured by tacit assumptions which constrain the range of inferences and conjectures which believers can make about religious entities and processes (73), has four papers: one by J.D. Keller and F.K. Lehman on the complexity, because of embedded meanings and polysemy, of two ideas central to the cosmology of islanders of West Futuna, Vanuatu (74-92); one by Roger Keesing on the evocative power of focal metaphors, such as 'earth' and 'path', in Kwaio culture on Malaita,
Solomon Islands (93-110); one by Maurice Bloch, who explores the intuitive connections made by a Malagasy society between trees, wood, houses, and humans, and their dealing with the first three as metaphorical substitutes for the latter after rules, postulated as specific by Atran for concept formation about living beings (111-120); and one by Boyer who analyses 'the role of implicit ontological hypotheses' (125) restricting the range of predicates that can be applied to a specific cognitive domain, in the praxis of cultural categories in a number of traditional societies; which role corresponds to 'the surprisingly finegraded ontological distinctions' (127) between several cognitive domains which cognitive psychology has shown children in Western societies to use intuitively even at an early age. As these distinctions 'are transmitted without being taught' (139) in both settings, Boyer suggests that they must be explained by a faculty for 'intuitive heuristics' (140) in man which automatically triggers the application of certain distinctions to certain domains (121-141). The third part is on how beliefs are acquired and fixed; it has two contributions. In the first (147-164), Christina Toren challenges the assumption that 'the symbolic' is a separate domain located in ritual, unconstrained by everyday knowledge. She argues on the basis of her ethnographic work with school children on Gau, in central Fiji, that it becomes such by a process of progressive cognitive development in the children when they gradually learn to discern the symbolic meaning intended in a certain behaviour. If Toren deals with a well-structured ritual, the symbolic meaning of which children gradually discover, Carlo Severi in the second article (165-181) deals with the dark language and behaviour of the shamans among the Cuna Indians of Panama, from which the participants in their rituals only gradually construct, by analogy with non-ritual situations, vague, and by the variety which vagueness allows, complex and highly personal, representations of the invisible entities, which can be sensed but not seen, and which are believed to be actively involved in their situation. He contends that these very loose notions are produced performatively in the pragmatics of the ritual and often have no existence elsewhere (166). The fourth and final part also has two contributions, by Thomas Lawson (188-206) and Michael Houseman (207-224), on the intrinsic properties and structure of ritual action. Lawson uses the Chomskyan notion of competence for a general account of the structure of ritual produced by the participants' intuitions about when a ritual is 'well-formed', and when it is not. Central to his argument is