TOWARDS A COGNITIVE SCIENCE OF RELIGION

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It is difficult to miss the fact that the last fifty years has given birth to a revolution in the sciences. This revolution has not only transformed the way scientists theorize about the human mind but the means they have devised to test their theories. Cognitive science, which has emerged in the context of this revolution, has coordinated, distilled and extended the particular explanatory theories of human cognition provided by cognitive psychology, cognitive anthropology, linguistics, artificial intelligence (AI), philosophy, neuroscience and computer science. It has even begun to operate within the context of comparative religion. The purpose of this contribution is to discuss the relevance of cognitive science for the study of the religious ideas and practices of humankind by pursuing three questions: 1) Is a cognitive science of religion possible? 2) Is a cognitive science of religion necessary? 3) Is a cognitive science of religion emerging?

*Is A Cognitive Science of Religion Possible?*

Theorizing about religion as a *cultural* system is standard fare in the social sciences and has also had a great impact on studies in the humanities. Theorizing about religion as a set of cultural phenomena from a *cognitive* perspective is a more recent development. In fact, in many respects a cognitive approach to cultural phenomena such as religion is quite novel, and because of such novelty, capable of arousing intense suspicion and even antagonism. One of the main reasons for such a response to this new science has been the inevitable suspicion aroused whenever scholars make appeals to psychological explanations of socio-cultural phenomena. The standard assumption in the social sciences and the humanities has been that only social and cultural methods can explain social and cultural facts. Of course the possibility of a cognitive science of religion depends upon showing
that cognitive explanations of socio-cultural facts not only are possible but have already happened. If cognitive science has already been successful in developing interesting, powerful and empirically tractable theories of one cultural form then that success certainly would have relevance for a science of other cultural phenomena such as religion. And it is no longer much of a secret that a cognitive science of language, an eminently cultural phenomenon, is in full bloom and has been since the fifth decade of the twentieth century. Ever since the publication of Noam Chomsky’s *Syntactic Structures* (1957) the cognitive study of language has made astonishing progress. Explanatory theories abound at the phonological, syntactic and semantic levels of analysis. (For a recent popular account of the cognitive revolution in the study of language see Steven Pinker’s *The Language Instinct* [1994].)

In earlier theorizing about human languages one feature of languages which had seemed to pose problems for cross-cultural generalizations had been their seemingly endless variability. Such variability seemed an obstacle to systematic study whether one focussed upon the differences in sounds, the differences in word order, or the differences in meaning. The variety of languages and language forms in the world is immense not even taking local dialects into consideration. It would seem that no one scholar could ever hope to develop a significant command of all of these languages. So how could one produce a theory unless one had command of all of the facts? Scholars of religion who are equally cognizant of the great variety of religions and religious forms could take comfort in the massiveness of religious variety and settle for something less or something other than generalizations about religious phenomena. So if, despite such variation, a cognitive science of language has in fact emerged this gives scholars of religion hope that a similar cognitive science of religion could be developed.

Another feature of language worthy of note to scholars of religion is that, such diversity notwithstanding, the cognitive study of language has led to the development of theories about the underlying structure of language. Such study has revealed that deep down languages are not that different from each other. In fact not only have cognitive scientists developed powerful competence theories of the phonology, syntax and