Dimitris Xygalatas and William W. McCorkle, Jr. (eds.)

*Mental Culture: Classical Social Theory and the Cognitive Science of Religion.*


This book is an edited volume of chapters written by authors who are in one way or another involved in the study of religion. The editors’ aim was to pay a tribute to classical theories in the study of religion by demonstrating their contribution as predecessors of contemporary theories in the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR). Accordingly, each contributor (excluding Robert McCauley, whose chapter will be discussed further) presents an aspect of the theoretical progression from the classical study of religion to CSR paradigms. Contributing authors in this volume come from a range of disciplines including philosophy, anthropology, psychology, and sociology. This variety is the strongest contribution of this book.

Stewart Guthrie follows Spinoza, Hume and Horton in claiming that “religion” is in fact a cognitive endeavor (much like science) used to “interpret and influence the world”. Jason Slone highlights Marx’s theory of religion as an opiate of the proletariat and offers data about the spread of religiosity in the USA to support the claim that religion is more often embraced by those of low socioeconomic status. He goes on to account for this phenomenon by means of sexual selection theory. Harvey Whitehouse presents a cautionary tale about cognitive science overzealously fractionating Durkheim’s notion of the “sacred”. Ann Taves suggests using cognitive approaches, specifically J.J. Gibson’s notion of “affordances” to improve on Weber’s theory of charisma. Konrad Talmont-Kaminski seeks to show that an evolutionary approach to the study of behaviour, which, as he claims, is the core of CSR, could bridge seemingly disparate theories. He demonstrates this by reconciling Malinowski’s and Skinner’s theories regarding human proclivity towards magical practices. Joseph Bulbulia explains Freud’s social-functional model of religion in a way that
marks religion as an asset for the creation and persistence of governance, using the examples of “threats” to cooperation in a secular society (i.e., inevitability of death, social classes, uncertainty of nature), for which religion provides a haven. Gordon Ingram, inspired by Jean Piaget’s stage theory, argues for the importance of a developmental component in CSR theories. According to Piaget, children do not acquire moral concepts from adults but construct them from environmental (social) cues they perceive throughout development. Ingram, assuming that morality is a critical aspect of religions, thus finds it important to explain moral development to understand religious behavior. Tanya M. Luhrmann and Pascal Boyer refer to William James and Claude Lévi-Strauss (respectively) and their chapters are discussed in depth later. Armin W. Geertz takes on the task of clearing Clifford Geertz’s name by claiming that Geertz was arguing for a “unitary system of analysis” (synthetic approach) rather than a stratified one, and claims that Geertz’s theory has much in common with (and might be the predecessor of) Dual Inheritance Theory (DIT). And last, Edward Slingerland re-interprets Confucius’s Analects to show instances of implied “psychological interiority”, as opposed to the commonly accepted interpretation by Fingarette, using the notion of embodied-cognition and the example of primary metaphors (“Important” implies “Big”; “More” implies “Up”, etc.). Slingerland further claims that cognitive science can support the study of religion, as in the case of conceptual metaphor analysis which can be the basis for cross cultural studies, such as comparative religion.

For an introduction to some basic aspects of the study of religion, this volume is a good source. The literature reviews presented in this book are extensive and, as demonstrated above, are inclusive of in-depth discussions of theories as early as Confucius and as recent as Clifford Geertz. The authors, current researchers of religious thought and behavior, juxtapose their own interests with those of their scholarly forebears and, notably, betray the levels of analysis at which they approach the study of religion. Although all contributors refer to earlier theories, only some have used those traditional theories in the study of religion to build on and suggest new endeavors in the form of theories at the cognitive level of analysis (i.e., CSR), while others try to use new cognitive tools to justify or support traditional theories about religion per se. Interestingly, these approaches diverge in significant ways, thereby challenging the statement of the editors that a “coherent CSR field exists”. The editors claim that the coherence lies in the agreed upon notion that, in order to explain religious behavior, one must take into consideration the workings of the human mind. However, as is demonstrated within the chapters of this volume, there are salient differences between theories with regard to the role of the mind in religious behavior. The tension on this point between the