



International work in the cognitive science of religion

Armin W. Geertz
Prof., Dr.Phil., Director
Religion, Cognition and Culture
Laboratory on Theories of Religion
University of Aarhus, Denmark



The naturalistic study of religion

What it is not

- Theology (plenty of theological institutions take care of that subject)
- Philosophy of religion (philosophy more or less in the hands of Protestant theologians)
- Religious studies (an American institution often theologically biased)
- Religious dialogue (religions take care of that themselves)
- Science and religion in dialogue (this often leads to the misuse of science)
- Cognitive neuroscience of religion vs. religion in cognitive neuroscience

What it is

- Comparative (all religions throughout history)
- Source analyses (iconography, architecture, costumes, texts, oral literature, symbols, etc.)
- Analyses using historical, sociological, psychological, literary, archaeological, linguistic, and philosophical methods and theories

Goals

- Origins; Forms; Structures; Functions; Meanings

Why a naturalistic study of religion?

Religions are powerful and dangerous!

- Monopoly on truth and meaning
- Symbolic framework for selves, identities and roles
- Totalistic, teleological systems that are:
 - Highly normative
 - Wildly counterintuitive
 - Intensely emotional
 - Incredibly diverse
 - Mutually incompatible with other systems
 - Mindlessly ritualistic
- Motivates individuals and groups to just about anything from sublime altruism to suicidal terrorism
- Authority, tradition and respect issues
- Intrinsically intolerant to agnostic or alternative options
- Very costly and dangerous to your health
- Inexplicably tenacious and perhaps adaptively advantageous



The International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion

Objective

- To promote the cognitive science of religion through international collaboration of all scholars whose research has a bearing on the subject.
- The IACSR seeks to advance the naturalistic study of religion.
- The cognitive science of religion is multidisciplinary.
- Specialists in religion have an important role to play, since colleagues from disciplines need creative interplay and feed-back.
- Close collaboration with cognitive scientists and experimental psychologists in hitherto new and exciting ways.
- The IACSR provides the framework for interdisciplinary debate, new findings,

innovative theories and helping young scholars along their chosen paths.

Activities

- Conferences, networking, exchange, courses
- Website (<http://www.iacsr.com>), e-list, e-library
- Supports the electronic *Archive for Religion & Cognition* at Centre for Religion & Cognition, Groningen (<http://www.csr-arc.com>)
- Supports *Journal of Cognition & Culture* (Brill Publishers)
- Supports *Cognitive Science of Religion Series* (AltaMira) and *Religion, Cognition and Culture* (Equinox)



Best Practice: Religion, Cognition and Culture

<http://www.teo.au.dk/en/research/current/cognition>

History & Objectives

- Laboratory on Theories of Religion, Dept. of the Study of Religion, University of Aarhus.
- “Religious Narrative, Cognition and Culture” 2003-2004; “Religion, Cognition and Culture” 2005-2008
- To explore and bring into contact theories and approaches from the humanities and social sciences with what can broadly be called neurocognitive studies.
- One of the most important insights gained is that cognition is not exclusively about what goes on in the head, but more importantly about what goes on in the social and intersubjective dynamics between individuals.

Activities

- guest researchers; doctoral students
- courses and workshops for university students
- international conferences, a website, e-newsletter
- publications in Danish and in English; textbook
- cooperative interdisciplinary ventures:
 - Centre for Functionally Integrative Neuroscience
 - Niels Bohr Professors Chris Frith and Uta Frith, London, England
 - Cognition, Communication and Culture (Faculty of Humanities, Aarhus)
 - The University Hospitals in Aarhus and Skejby, Denmark
 - Institute of Cognition and Culture, Queen’s University, Belfast, Ireland
 - Centre of Anthropology and Mind, Oxford University, England
 - Mind and Society in the Transmission of Religion, Department of Comparative Religion, University of Helsinki, Finland
- NEST Pathfinder initiative (6th Framework, European Commission): “Explaining Religion” together with Oxford, Belfast, Liverpool, Groningen, Paris, Salzburg, Zürich, Sophie, Brunel



Cooperation with CNCC programmes

Subjects

- Consciousness (Dennett multiple drafts; Damasio core and extended selves; Edelman dynamic core; Persinger temporal lobe religiosity; Gallese mirror neurons; Barsalou social embodiment)
- Origins (Deacon symbolic competence; Donald biocultural model; Dunbar gossip and language)
- Language (Lakoff & Johnson metaphor; Turner & Fauconnier conceptual blends; Siegel integrated brain)
- Morality (Haidt happiness; Biering intuition; Frith mind blindness)
- Ideas (Sperber epidemiology of representations; Dawkins et al. memes; Boyer counterintuitive conceptions)
- Ritual (d'Aquili et al. biogenetic structuralism; Prince chemistry of religiosity; Lawson & McCauley ritual representations; Whitehouse modes of religiosity)
- Neural correlates (Azari; Schjødt)

Possible cooperative themes in relation to the CNCC programmes

- BASIC: religious persons and identities; supernatural agency; spirit possession; meditation
- Boundaries of Mind: how religions manipulate with the environment, bodies and symbols; how religious cognitive systems are collective
- CEWR: meditation and religious philosophical traditions
- CONTACT: how religions conceptualize, categorize and interact with the environment; the subtle boundaries between gods, humans and animal in indigenous religions
- METACOGNITION: the evolution of religion; do animals have proto-religious or 'superstitious' sensibilities