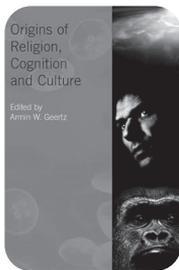# A COGNITIVE WAVE IN THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS. THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Armin W. Geertz (ed.), *Origins of Religion, Cognition and Culture*, Routledge, 2014

Abstract: The vision of new perspectives in the study of religions developed mainly in the last decade around the cognitive school of Aarhus University, which started Denmark's first advanced cognitive science degree programme. In the volume *Origins of Religion, Cognition and Culture*, edited by Armin W. Geertz, the authors examine evolutionary scenarios in the cognitive study of religions and approaches to cognitive theories. The volume unites internationally scholars and researchers specialised in psychology, philosophy, religion, and history of religions. The main objective of the volume is to develop a double-frame research, the first adressed to evolutionary scenarios in the origins of religions, and the second to discussing the initial theories and ramifications of those of the earliest cognitivists of religion.
Keywords: Culture; Religion; Cognition; Religious Behavior; Armin W. Geertz; Cognitive Science of Religion.

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The volume *Origins of Religion, Cognition and Culture* (2014), edited by Armin W. Geertz represents a collective work of research by scholars who focus on analysing how evolutionary scenarios function, using cognitive theories and approaches. The first part of the volume focuses on *Evolutionary Scenarios*, and the lines of research underline subjects as: "The prestige of the gods: evolutionary continuities in the formation of sacred objects" by William E. Paden, "The evolutionary dynamics of religious systems: laying the foundations of a network model" by István Czachesz, and "Art as a human universal: an adaptationist view" by Ellen Dissanayake, citing just a few. The second part of the volume, *Cognitive Theories*, is dedicated to the theories of the earliest cognitivists of religions. The studies are focusing on concepts from the origins of religion like „meaning", the co-evolution of culture and consciousness, elements of comparative religion and religious behaviour: "Cognition and meaning" by Jeppe Sinding Jensen, "Wittgenstein and the naturalness of religious belief" by Mark Addis, and ""Peekaboo!" and object permanence: on the play of concealment and appearance in cognition and religion" by Thomas Hoffmann.

The first chapter, "Whence religion? How the brain constructs the world and what this might tell us about the origins of religion, cognition and culture" explores a adaptationist approach. Armin W. Geertz suggests that the religious thought should be approached by the lines of neurobiology.

Specializing myself in my early career in biology and chemistry as a highshool student-researcher, the positions of neuroscience, microbiology and neurobiology had a first function in guiding the study of medicine and that of research. As Martin W. Geertz states: "Our brains are constantly predicting and dwelling on the future and our brains fill in quite a bit of what is missing, heavily supplemented (and even dictated) by the cultures we are socialized into[1]." Thus, the prediction capacity that our brains can install, as a predictive process, is heavily influenced by the ideea of religion and culture.

In the second chapter, "Why *costly signalling* models of religion require cognitive psychology", Joseph Bulbulia states that the character which religion introduces, that of religiosity should be stated as a evolutionary issue. The scholar is researching the ways in which the religious beliefs are manifested by the believers and how the religious behaviour enhances group survival[2]. Religious people and thus religious communities, based on the signalling model, are "especially cooperative", evidence showing that groups that pray together stay together[3].

The third chapter, "The prestige of the gods: evolutionary continuities in the formation of sacred objects", by William E. Paden, analyses religious complexes. William Paden remarks and describes these religious complexes as "systemic forms of enculturated prestige", thus places the element of culture back in the centre. The religious behaviour is integrated in a social display, claiming that religious groups are formed culturally and socially in a single sphere.

In the fourth chapter, "The evolutionary dynamics of religious systems: laying the foundations of a network model", István Czachesz develops a ramification model of a religious system. The centerpieces of István's system are the *beliefs* and the *artefacts*. The scholar states that there is a double interaction between artefacts and beliefs and a "network model" would also incorporate a temporal dimension. For István Czachesz, the system that he's forming is based on interaction: "It involves bidirectional interaction between religious beliefs and artefacts: religious beliefs, such as beliefs about gods, spirits, objects and places, facilitate the creation of artefacts, such as texts, objects, architecture, instruments and performances. Artefacts, in turn, generate beliefs in the minds of people who use them.[4]"The model of István Czachesz's religious system works as a network, based on interactions and fluctuations. Working as a living organism, the worlds incapsulated in each religious system form a path for investigating how these systems function and how are contained in a social and cultural display.

The second part of the volume, *Cognitive Theories,* looks back at the earlier theories on the dawn of religion, culture and cognition. In chapter 11, "Cognition and meaning", Jeppe Sinding Jensen, introduces new insights on the problem of *meaning*, overlooked in the cognitive science of religion, arguing that some theoretical positions in the cognitive approach of religions "contend that neither culture nor meaning are *anything but* aggregate material phenomena, i.e. mental processes which take place in the individual or the more radical position that *culture does not exist[5]*". In this way, one of the most debated idea which cognitive researchers are struggling to settle and work around, gains a new frame

of existence: "Culture is thus effortlessly reduced and dissolved into individual psychology or biology.[6]"

In chapter 12, "Wittgenstein and the naturalness of religious belief", Mark Addis discusses a methodological problem in the cognitive science of religions. He states that the cognitive study of religion opposes the idea that "religion requires special methods of study because it and especially religious experiences are deemed to be unique.[7]" The line of research that cognitive science of religion intends to promote is the process of differentiating between science and religion. The process of this methodology comes through "investigation into their cognitive foundations and cultural expressions using a number of methodological precepts.[8]" The link with Wittgenstein's thinking comes forth with the character of religious language, which can be viewed in an inaccurate perspective once its assumptions are regarded "as alternatives to scientific ones".

In chapter 13, ""Peekaboo!" and object permanence: on the play of concealment and appearance in cognition and religion", Thomas Hoffmann makes a plea for the scientific character of CSR (Cognitive Science of Religions) as the most current and up-to-date research regarding the study of religion. Even though this is valid, Hoffman remarks that today's cognitivists of religion neglect their precursors. A number of earlier philosophers and psychologists influenced substantially the cognitivist thinking, like George Herbert Mead, Gregory Bateson, Peter Singer, Jean Piaget and Jerome Bruner. In his study, Thomas Hoffmann advances two concepts, that of "object permanence" of Jean Piaget, and "containment schema" of

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. Hoffmann states that an evolutionary process had been developed, once the transformation of a first year old who transitioned from being unable to being able to maintain object permanence[9], took place.

In chapter 14, "Yogācāra Buddhist views on the causal relation between language, cognition and the evolution of worlds", William S. Waldron researches a indian yoga philosophy which forms around a model of co-development between culture and consciousness. William Waldron is a Professor at Middlebury College where he teaches Hinduism, Buddhism and the Study of Religion. In this study, Waldron discusses the element of causality which appears at the centre of the development of cognitive structures, culture and religion. The scholar argues that the causality in biological processes is multi-dimensional, and that they are evolving as organisms-interacting-with-environment. For Waldron, "We *do* presently depend upon cognitive and even cultural structures that were constructed in the past and that *do* strongly influence our current cognitive processes as well as our cultural and religious practices.[10]" The interesting fact that he states evolves around the lack of autonomy of the cognitive structures. The scholar argues that "For cognitive structures can never *cause* cognition, culture or religion *all on their own*.[11]" The line of thought that Waldron intends to establish regarding the lack of autonomy of cognition depends on the fact that cognitive structures are determined themselves by other implicit conditions "that allow them to continue to function in the present.[12]"

The volume manages to present an advanced frame of research by a well known

group of scholars regarding the current state of the study of religions. The efforts of the researchers constituted a work particularly useful for the study of religious ideas and the cognitivist study of religions. The circuit network formed by Armin W. Geertz editing a collective volume of research, established a groundwork device made for experimentation. Formulating new lines of research and reacknowledging prior theories of psychologists and cognitivists, they underline and develop a wave of study, forming thus a new practical knowledge for the domain of religion.

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NOTES

1. Geertz, W. Armin (ed.), *Origins of Religion, Cognition and Culture*, Routledge, 2014, p. 8.

2. *Ibidem*, p. 71.

3. *Ibidem*, p. 73.

4. *Ibidem*, p. 103.

5. *Ibidem*, p. 242.

6. *Ibidem*.

7. *Ibidem*, p. 258.

8. *Ibidem*.

9. *Ibidem*, p. 273.

10. *Ibidem*, p. 286.

11. *Ibidem*.

12. *Ibidem*.