

# INTRODUCTION TO THE COGNITIVE SCIENCE OF RELIGION

E. THOMAS LAWSON

LEVYNA

- IN ORDER TO TALK ABOUT THE COGNITIVE SCIENCE OF RELIGION WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT
  - SCIENCE
  - COGNITION
  - RELIGION

# What is Science?

- Science: Science seeks causal explanation rather than interpretations.
- Explanation → Causes
- Interpretation → Meanings
  - Example: Ritual behavior
  - Scientists ask why and how does it occur?
  - Interpreters ask what does it mean?

# What is cognition?

- Cognition: The cognitive revolution and the revolt against behaviorism
  - Behaviorists attempted to give causal explanations (for example of ritual behavior) without reference to mental processes
  - Cognitivists showed by theory and experiment that mental terms were necessary to provide a causal explanation of some forms of behavior
  - Not everything is just a response to a stimulus
  - The case of linguistics which was one of the prime movers of the cognitive revolution

- So what is cognition?
  - Cognition is how we come to know the world, the brain at work
  - Cognitive science is the theoretical and empirical study of these mental processes and brain which accounts for them
  - Some of these processes are the result of natural selection, the most basic principle of evolution

- So what is a mental process?
- A mental process is a function of the brain in action
- The mind is what the brain does with input from the environment and with its own internal resources

# What is religion?

- The definitional problem: too many and little agreement
- Definitions are little more than summaries of theory
- So it is more fruitful to start with a theory rather than a definition

# What is a theory?

- A theory is an informed conjecture of what might be able to account for any form of behavior especially unusual behavior
- A theory focuses on a set of facts and suggests one or more hypotheses to account for these forms of behavior for example shaping behavior
- The more specific the hypothesis the more fruitful the results
  - For example a Zulu ritual
  - For example a Zulu belief

- Whereas an anthropologist might suggest the meaning of the ritual and the belief a cognitive scientist will hypothesize about the causal factors that generate the ritual and the belief
- In the field much of beliefs and behaviors are unproblematic
- People everywhere sleep, eat, talk, argue, make love, sing, dance, tell stories etc. No problem to explain there except if you need to explain the difference between humans and apes (then evolution must be taken account of)

- What attracts our attention is unusual (counter-intuitive) behavior
- Anthropologists with such behavior ask informants why they believe and do such unusual things
- Answers: We have always done it  
Don't ask me as him  
How much time do you have?

- We derive some explanations by asking such questions but they are all examples of reflective thinking which only tells the conscious part of the story
- It does not explain why some forms of behavior are so widespread and so similar

# Reflective behavior

- We need to distinguish between reflective and intuitive behavior
- Examples
- Reflective behavior requires conscious thought
  - It is thought about the behavior
  - Science is an example of reflective behavior
  - Theorizing is an example of reflective behavior

# Intuitive behavior

- Intuitive behavior is dispositional behavior
  - It is the tendency of humans to almost automatically respond to the world in certain ways
  - Examples from developmental psychology

- Religious behavior combines both reflective and intuitive behavior
  - Theology is an example of reflective behavior where agency is thought of in highly abstract terms
  - Folk views of agency are agent oriented
  - Experimental work about agency: the tendency to attribute agency to a wide range of events

