Abstract

The aim of cognitive science of religion (CSR) is explaining religious phenomena. Explaining is usually not defined by scientists and can have a variety of meanings. The term can roughly be defined as “answering a better insight into something or offering a reducing account.” The first meaning is almost universally adopted by science but many scientists also aim at the latter. Scientific theories of religion resort to both forms of explanation. Some scientists are satisfied if a single religious cognition or the way religious functions; others are more ambitious. The reductionist approach in CSR is of a special kind; it aims at naturalistic explanations. Religious phenomena (experience, concepts, ... ) usually believed to carry an essential reference to the supernatural (God, gods or spirits) and are thus not naturalistic. Some theories aim at explaining religious phenomena without any reference to the supernatural or these theories are interpreted in this way.

This paper will investigate whether the best-known theories in CSR succeeding in clarifying religious belief I turn to the discussion to Justin Barrett’s Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (HADD) (Barrett 2004), Jesus Bereit’s ‘Explanatory Theory of Mind’ (ETOM) (Bering 2002), and Pascal Boyer’s Cognitive Optimum (also known as material counterintuitive concepts or MCC’s) (Boyer 2001). Barrett himself does not claim that his theory amounts to a naturalisation of religious belief but it has been interpreted in this way. Boyer and Bereit, on the other hand, do themselves conclude to the naturalistic narrative above stated. HADD, ETOM and the Cognitive Optimum only provide better insights into the inclination to acquire or hold religious beliefs which people have and thus seen. At first glance, instances of the first kind of explanation do not allow a clear-cut division. All, however, are not satisfied with a mere explanation of how the human mind works concerning religious belief but they also try to explain why religious belief is rooted in the human mind. The aim of a theory about a cognitive faculty (HADD, ETOM, MCC’s) with a biological history seems a safer task for an explanation of religious belief than the supernatural and would thus be reducible in nature.

Questions to assess the success of the reductive explanation in question are: Does the explanation adequately cover religious belief? Is the description of the workings of the cognitive mechanism in question in alignment with how people actually acquire religious beliefs? Are the evolutionary histories sufficiently consistent and probable? This article will try to answer these questions for our three-theories.

Introduction

It is widely accepted that scientists engage in the business of explaining phenomena, and cognitive scientists of religion are no exception to this. The last two decades have witnessed the emergence of a number of new theories of religion. By contrast to mere descriptions of religious phenomena (e.g. from cultural anthropology or sociology), cognitive theories aim at explaining the internal dynamics of religion, especially religious cognition. ‘Explaining’ is a term open to a number of interpretations. One important distinction is between ‘explanation in Michael Friedman and Philip Kitcher’s unification theory (Friedman 1974, Kitcher 1989). Briefly stated, the idea is that [scientific] explanations provide a unified account of a range of different phenomena. Cognitive science of religion does this by pointing to the cognitive mechanisms or cognitive make-up involved in religious cognition. But this has to make clear that we claim these mechanisms are not distinct from those at work in ‘ordinary’ cognition.

The unification model can be applied to CSR. CSR tries to give an account of religious cognition as appealing to the cognitive mechanisms at work. Theories from CSR can be considered to have unified accounts for religious cognition in the framework of cognitive science. This framework is naturalistic one since it avoids reference or postulation of supernatural or ‘quasi’ entities. It is naturalistic because it faces the framework of cognitive science, is possible but another question is whether the explanations are good ones.

To assess if an explanation is good, philosophers have formulated a number of explanatory virtues, like breadth, depth, simplicity, adequacy, elegance, testability and internal consistency. In the remainder of, what would look at some important theories from recent CSR and assess them in regard of these virtues. Because the field is vast, the discussion will be limited to Justin Barrett’s Hypereactive Agency Detection Device, Pascal Boyer’s Cognitive Optimum and Jesus Bereit’s ‘Explanatory Theory of Mind’.

The Cognitive Optimum hinges on a problematic notion of (counter)intuitivity which does not hold up under closer scrutiny. The theory’s strength is also ‘explanatory power’; the Cognitive Optimum offers a number of explanations. The theory’s weakness is Boyer’s understanding of (counter)intuitivity which does not hold up under closer scrutiny.

The Moral Dyad (Gray 2012)

Cognitive Mechanism: The Moral Dyad (MD)

Functioning: It means divide moral situations into the two roles of moral agents and moral patients; moral agents being those who do good and moral patients those who receive good or bad.

Link with religion: When people perceive good or bad in the world without perceiving a clear moral agent, they attribute to it the ultimate moral agent, God.

The Explanatory Theory of Mind (Bering 2002)

Cognitive Mechanism: Explanatory Theory of Mind (ETOM)

Functioning: ETOM allows for attributing meaning to things, people or situations. Meaning is connected to intentionality and thus attributed to a mind.

Link with religion: The Aveo comes to people saying to mean in narratives or random events and as a result they postulate an ultimate giver of meaning, God.

The Theoretical Analysis of Moral Agency (Boyden 2004)

Cognitive Mechanism: Agency detection device (ADD)

Functioning: Detects agency from cues like rustling leaves, patterns, etc. Suffers from hyperactivity insofar as it often detects agents where no visible agency detection and morality for religion, but is still not the whole story. Adequate: Moderate depth and breadth make for moderate adequacy.

Link with religion: HADD, MD and EToM share the problem that they fail to specify why the cognitive mechanism is hyperactive when attributing meaning to God?

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