

The cognitive science of religion: an article review essay examples

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



Religion is one of the most valuable and indispensable aspect in human life. Globally, across countries with different cultures, religion has a diverse shape and identity. But digging deep into it, what is the science behind religion? What are the aspects of religion that makes it successful in shaping cultures, and even the entire history of mankind?

Scientists' attempt to decipher the scientific factors that stage the success of religions gave birth to another school of thought called as The Cognitive Science of Religion. The cognitive science of religion is the field of science that aims to explain the relationship of the emergence and popularity of religions to the way our brain functions. Concisely, the cognitive science of religion is a collaborative discipline that relates psychology, neuroscience and evolutionary science to social sciences such as anthropology, philosophy, artificial intelligence and ethology (Swan 3). The discipline of cognitive science currently holds that religion is the byproduct of the evolution and connection between numerous cognitive mechanisms (Swan 10). Dissecting the core cognitive mechanisms that yield religious beliefs will take us closer to understanding the contribution of our brain to the development of religion.

In article that explains the cognitive science of religion in length and in-depth, there are numerous determined cognitive mechanisms considered as the pillars of religion. Intuition and memory are said to play a crucial role in an individual's tendency to believe in a god. In a study conducted by Pascal Boyer and Charles Ramble, the relationship between intuition and memory was explained (Swan 1). As the study showed, objects that deviate from human intuition stay in the memory of an individual and eventually become

remarkable (Swan 1). In an experiment comparing intuitive and counterintuitive objects' appeal to the memory, it was shown that counterintuitive objects appeal more to memory (Swan 2). This justifies people's innate inclination to believe and value superstitions.

Another mechanism that is said to be connected with religion is human's innate HADD or hyperactive agency detection device. HADD is the component of human cognition that automatically assigns an agent to explain something that causes disturbance within the environment (Swan 2-3). The connection of HADD with the cognitive science of religion is said to date back from the ancestral times when the earliest human on earth tried to explain phenomena within his or her surroundings by assigning a counterintuitive agent as responsible (Swan 3). The belief of our ancestors to the powers of counterintuitive agent as the sole responsible for any disturbances in the environment that cannot be explained served as a defensive impulse used to overly assume the occurrence of a threat (Swan 3). This very trait may be linked to human's natural tendency to attribute any unexplained phenomena to entities whose existence are not yet proven (Swan 3).

Furthermore, human's inclination to associate humanness with the supernatural entities whose powers are believed to encompass beyond space and time—a trait called anthropomorphism—is the common concept associated with anecdotes and narratives that elaborate an individual's perception of god (Swan 3). Usually, modern religions and worshippers describe god as someone who possess traits that are also present in humans (Swan 3).

The article deeply explains the cognitive mechanisms that are involved in every aspect of religion. As annotated in the article, emotion also plays a significant role in the lasting prevalence and success of diverse religions globally. The fervent emotions usually displayed during worship ceremonies or rituals of most religions are the most compelling factor that asserts the seriousness of faith being proclaimed within the entire religious body (Swan 4). The power of religions to appeal to the emotions of its worshippers or members is also a factor that makes it memorable and remarkable to the believers (Swan 4).

Aside from the abovementioned findings of cognitive science of religion, the article also explains the moral advantages included with religion. As expounded in the paper, religions are the society's best motivator for the pro-social attitudes of its citizens (Swan 5). As reported, individuals who display deep attachment to their religions are more likely to become generous and charitable (Swan 5). In addition to the pro-social traits specified above that can be motivated by religion, a strong sense of unity, friendship, cooperation, and loyalty are other factors that can be strengthened by one's involvement in a religion (Swan 5). The usual mandatory dress codes, tattoos, and other special symbols implemented by some religions among their members to emphasize and advertise their alliance is seen as the main contributory factor that promotes the abovementioned pro-social traits (Swan 5).

Costly display of commitment is also a common feature that can be observed among the well-attached worshippers of religion (Swan 6). But, considered as the key question of the cognitive science of religion, why are people to

keen to devote time and other resources to costly religious rituals despite the lack of an immediate tangible result (Swan 6)? Explaining this, cognitive scientists propose that, worshippers' devotion to the religious rituals despite the usual high cost serves the purpose of emphasizing their commitment to the significance of the rituals being made (Swan 6). The costly display of religious commitment is also seen as a way to advertise the values believed by the entire religious group (Swan 6). People who observe the devotion and commitment of members of a religious group to meet the requirements that are associated with the rituals, despite the probable high cost, often translate them into the credibility of the religion (Swan 6).

Another cognitive mechanism that is universally associated with religion is mankind's innate fear of death (Swan 7). The thought of death as the ultimate end of all life is usually a dreadful realization (Swan 7). As theorized, human's natural fear of death must be pacified, giving birth to the concept of afterlife—the cornerstone of almost all religions globally (Swan 7).

Furthermore, religions serve the purpose of pacifying the inevitable need of mankind to reconnect with their loved ones with the promises of afterlife through a lifetime of good deeds (Swan 7). Paranormal beliefs are also governed by this aspect of religion. The belief in ghosts or spirits that do not feel earthly biological qualities such as hunger, thirst, sensory perception, and/or a functional but are capable of manifesting and receiving emotional concepts such as love and acceptance is best explained by the mankind's natural fear of death (Swan 7).

While religions is considered an inevitable popular factor that promote further diversity within a community, today's technology are becoming too

rampant and extensive that it affects even the oldest pillars of religion. According to one article, three factors are considered as the main factors that contribute to the decline of a population's involvement in a religious affiliation and those are " a drop in religious upbringing, an increase in college-level education and the increase in Internet use" (Hu 2). An example of a country that experiences such a decline in religious populations is USA (Hu 2). As stated in an article, the number of people without religious affiliations has been doubling since 1990 (Hu 2). Determining whether this drop in religious involvement of people is a good thing or bad still needs further research.

Overall, religions among different cultures, however diverse, are generally a positive aspect of a society. The pro-social factors that can be motivated by the belief to a supernatural entity and the opportunity of afterlife through good deeds are the prime contributions of a religion. However, unhealthy dogmas that are inevitably taught by a certain religion that often compel its worshippers to cause violence are the negative side of religion. Studying the science behind religions is a best way to understand the how and why religion affects our lives so deeply.

Works Cited

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Swan, Thomas. The Cognitive Science of Religion. Oct. 29, 2014. Web. 1 Dec. 2014