

# Cognitive science of religion

[Business](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

According to Jong (2012), the cognitive science of religion is an interdisciplinary research program that mainly involves psychologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and religious studies scholars whose aim is to explain religion. This means that the program aims to fathom the scientific and psychological underpinnings of religious belief and behavior to explain the ubiquity of religious belief and practice and the similarities and differences across religious traditions. The parties involved (anthropologists, psychologists, etc) all find the topic important when explaining the phenomenon since religion is a both variable and diverse in terms of universality of the human mind.

Religion is a legitimate subject for study by cognitive scientists, though it remains neglected by experimental psychology. Cognitive science of religion enriches our understanding of meaningful, spiritual, and subjective phenomena related to religion by showing how they connect with the operations of the human mind, which is embodied and embedded in traditions, cultures, and discourses. Cognitive science of religion achieves this integrating and enlisting the results and methods of at least a half dozen different scientific approaches and their concomitant theoretical perspectives. These perspectives include the cognitive, comparative, evolutionary, neural, archaeological, and developmental among others. Cognitive science of religion deploys these methods to generate new kinds of evidence bearing on man's understanding of religious systems and individual's religious cognition and conduct. According to Sam Harris, a belief is like a lever that once pulled, moves almost everything else in a person's life.

The beliefs characterize people's vision of the world, prescribe their behavior, and influence their emotional reactions to other people. He argues that the belief system is what has led to many people believing that there is a Creator of the universe who has written a book. Religious beliefs are the basis of supernatural agents such as ghosts, angels, demons, souls, and spirits. They raise more questions such as why religious beliefs are so counterintuitive and persistent despite causing political persecution such as in Communist China or Socialist Albania. Jong continues to explain that we create gods in our own image and lament that fear of death drives religious belief, therefore cognitive science comes up with psychological explanations of religion.

Harris recognizes that we have been slow to acknowledge the degree to which religious faith perpetrates man's inhumanity to man. It does not surprise him since most of us believe that faith is an essential component of human life. Faith is not prone to rational criticism because of the two myths that seem to foster religious extremism and religious moderation equally. First is that most of us believe that there are good things that people get from religious faith such as ethical behaviors and spiritual experience that we cannot find anywhere else. Second is that many of us believe that the terrible things that are sometimes done in the name of religion are the products of our baser natures such as greed and hatred and not faith, for which religious beliefs are themselves the best remedy.

Harris reasons that a combination of these two myths seem to have granted us perfect immunity to outbreaks of reasonableness in our public discourse. Cognitive scientists provide a vast depository of ideas and hypothesis to <https://assignbuster.com/cognitive-science-of-religion/>

ponder and test. Cognitive science of religion adapts from this rich intellectual tradition, and from contemporary psychology and evolutionary theory to carry on the explanations. According to the science, our brains evolved by natural selection, which explains our cognitive and behavioral tendencies that supervene upon neurological structures and processes shaped by our phylogenetic history. The idea that any one of the world religions represents the infallible word of the One True God requires an encyclopedic ignorance of history, mythology, and art as the beliefs, rituals, and iconography of each of our religions attest to centuries of cross-pollination among them.

Dawkins also thinks some the beliefs are unproven yet many religious treat them as factual and some followers follow them to the extremes of killing people “ because they are motivated by what they think is the highest ideal.” He explains that faith make people not think and so it is not a way of understanding the world, but instead blocks the fundamental development of science and is both dangerous and divisive. In addition, Dawkins thinks that faith and science are in constant conflict since science involves constant research, testing, updating, and revision on discovering new evidence. Faith on the other hand makes an asset out of believing improvable and often improbable suggestions. This, just like all other scientific propositions, leaves cognitive science of religion prone to some criticism such as reductionism, and that science is not the only way of gaining knowledge. According to McCauley, anything we know is potentially pertinent to judging the truth of any new hypothesis or interpreting any new pragmatic discovery in science.

This is no less true for all other forms of human inquiry, but science (including cognitive) is one field where humans pursue new evidence rigorously. Scientists mostly attend to reductionist checks from bottom up, because of the greater generality and precision of theories and because of the greater evidential rigor that typically accrues to what usually more mature programs of research are carried out at lower levels of analysis in science. Just like Dawkins, McCauley thinks science attends to solving problems based on evidential support, hypothesis generation, and experimental techniques. Cognitive science of religion is a top-down research on dynamical modeling of systems' operations in context as on idealized pictures of the mechanisms that make those systems up. On the other hand, religions apply special pleading, which is a form of evidential opportunism.

Whereas science is opportunistic in assessing any hypothesis, religion has characteristics of special pleading applied in various forms beyond those adopted from social sciences. Dawkins' example of indoctrination of children is one way of applying of special pleading. Dawkins prefers that cultural beliefs be taught without forcing children to believe obvious falsehoods such as AIDS being a punishment for sin. Another form of special pleading that Dawkins mentions is the Christian demonstration of the torture and death of Jesus so that people might get redemption from the original sin. He wonders if God really wanted to forgive us, he would simply have done so without having to impress.

This form of special pleading has evidence documented throughout history, and has plagued religious studies throughout the centuries. Cognitive  
<https://assignbuster.com/cognitive-science-of-religion/>

science of religions believes that beliefs in gods are an evolutionary sub-product of a collection of adaptive cognitive schemes mostly relating to folk psychology. Similarly, beliefs that super deities wrote or “inspired” religious books are a sign of intoxication of myths and the decline of reason. Harris notes that this cognitive scenery makes us decide what religious “moderate” means. Moderates in every faith are obliged to loosely interpret (or ignore) most of the fundamentals in the interests of living in the modern world. Faith itself has evolved to the product of the many hammer blows of modernity that have exposed certain tenets of faith to doubt.

People now value evidence, yet the moderates apply evidence in partitioned ways. For instance, according to Harris, a moderate may need for evidence that frozen yoghurt makes a man invisible yet he will not require evidence to prove an invisible being that will punish him if he does not follow what the book dictates inspired his religious book. Morality is a common argument for religious belief yet cognitive science for religions proves otherwise. An evolution psychologists interviewed by Dawkins noted that primordial morality is present even among primates like chimpanzees. This is evidence that people do not need religion to demonstrate morality, and this is portrayed in the concepts of selecting kin for marriage. Dawkins discusses morality as a secular value based on empathy, which should confer upon us a sense of responsibility.

Religion is in fact a cause of secular immorality such as wars as Harris gives examples. Religious extremity and moderation has been a cause of death for humanity over history. Religion is a spring of violence in areas such as Palestine (Jews and Muslims), Sudan (Muslims versus Christians and

<https://assignbuster.com/cognitive-science-of-religion/>

animists), Sri Lanka (Sinhalese Buddhists versus Tamil Hindus), and Northern Ireland (Protestants and Catholics), among others. When people have divergent and irreconcilable notions about faith and after-life and then make the people stay together with limited resources, the result is bloodshed and murder. History shows that such cycles are common since the days of the Roman gods and the famous Christian martyrs of the 12th to 14th century. Some religion supporters argue that it is not faith itself but man's baser nature that inspires such violence not unless they have improbable beliefs about the nature of the universe.

Most religions have no mechanism, by which their core beliefs can be tested or revised, as cognitive science does, and every successive adaption suffers the discriminatory superstitions of its predecessor. The above proves that cognitive science of religion gives people the chance to decipher the wisdom of the beautiful words in religious books is no different from the wisdom in the beautiful words of Shakespeare or Virgil. Secular morality is not a solution to the religious despair but is a better option than being drawn into mythical and untested propositions of afterlife. Dawkins reasons that atheism is a better solution than living life as a trial that we must persevere before going to a better afterlife. It simply means living life as well as one can with respect for all people while on earth. Had people not paid attention to religious ramblings, there would be no basis for hatred in the aforementioned areas.

There is a close relationship between spirituality, ethics, and positive emotions and cognitive science of religion is still trying to explain the phenomena. It however is no different from how man mysterious prefers love <https://assignbuster.com/cognitive-science-of-religion/>

to hate, or regards cruelty as wrong, than that, we agree in our judgments about the differences between colors. Cognitive science examines the problems inherent with faith and religion, and the threat that they pose. It also demonstrates how humanity can situate its ethical intuitions and capacity for spiritual experiences within the context of rational worldview. Cognitive science is a demonstration that academic and critical reasoning should not remain silent on spiritual and ethical questions related to faith.