

Introduction to the cognitive science of religion

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Course description

Religion is ubiquitous. At least 80% of the current world population believes in God, and virtually everyone has on at least one occasion taken part in a religious ceremony or ritual. Why do so many people believe in entities like gods, ghosts and ancestors? Why do people engage in the performance of rituals, and observe food taboos and religious dress code? This course provides a comprehensive survey of the topics and questions in cognitive science of religion (CSR), the interdisciplinary study of the thought processes that underlie religious beliefs and practices. CSR emerged in the late 1980s and is at present a vibrant and multifaceted field of inquiry. The course not only presents an overview of ongoing discussions but also probes lesser-researched domains, such as the role of testimony in the transmission of religious belief, and the relationship between science and religion. While the readings will be primarily from the cognitive science literature, there will be connections to topics in philosophy and theology.

Target audience

This course is aimed at graduate students, but recent or more advanced PhD holders are also welcome. The target audience are cognitive scientists (including, e.g., cognitive psychologists, developmental psychologists), philosophers and theologians, students of religious studies, and anyone else who wants to gain a better understanding of the cognitive processes involved in religious belief and practice. The course does not require a background in cognitive science, as all the relevant concepts will be introduced during the classes.

Course goals, format and preparation

This course does not provide a formal evaluation and is designed to help students and researchers get a sense of the literature in CSR and its relevance for philosophy and theology. Classes will take place once per week during Hilary term. Each class will take 2 hours, starting with a 40-minute lecture that will contextualize the topic of the readings, followed by

group discussion. When relevant, participants are encouraged to discuss how these topics relate to their own research, and briefly present ongoing research projects and papers (10-minute presentations). They will get the opportunity for feedback from others.

All papers to be read for this course and the PowerPoint files of the lectures can be downloaded in due course from Weblearn. Each session will feature two required papers to read, alongside some further suggested (but not required) readings. In order to participate, it is vital that you read at least the required readings prior to each class.

Overview of the course

Note: Minor deviations from the syllabus may occur.

Week 1 Cognitive science of religion: key issues, topics and approaches

This session introduces CSR, the interdisciplinary study of the cognitive basis of religious beliefs and practices. We will trace the roots of CSR within natural histories of religion, psychology of religion and sociology of religion. We will discuss two comprehensive theories in CSR: Stewart Guthrie's view that religious beliefs are elicited by our ability to detect (anthropomorphic) agents in the environment and Pascal Boyer's hypothesis that religious beliefs owe their advantage over other beliefs by being more memorable.

Readings:

- Barrett, Justin (2007). Cognitive science of religion: What is it and why is it? *Religion Compass* 1: 768–786.
- Bloom, Paul (2007). Religion is natural. *Developmental science* 10: 147–151.

Week 2 Belief in supernatural beings. Are we intuitive theists?

We will focus on the claim that humans have a natural propensity to believe in supernatural beings, such as gods, ghosts and ancestors. What is the basis of this natural propensity? How do we conceptualize supernatural agents? If theism is intuitive, why are some people atheists?

Readings:

- Kelemen, Deborah (2004). Are Children "Intuitive Theists?" *Psychological Science* 15: 295–301.
- Norenzayan, Ara, and Will M. Gervais (2012). The origins of religious disbelief. *Trends in cognitive science* 17: 20–25.

Week 3 Religious testimony, trust and the transmission of religious belief

Religious beliefs are transmitted and sustained by processes of social transmission, where testimony plays an important role. What are the features of testimony to religious beliefs? How do children and adults evaluate the testimony to religious ideas, such as miracle claims?

Readings:

- Harris, Paul & Kathleen Corriveau (in press). Learning from testimony about religion and science. In: Elizabeth Robinson & Shiri Einav (Eds). *Trust and skepticism: Children's selective learning from testimony*. Psychology Press.
- De Cruz, Helen & Johan De Smedt (accepted). The argument from miracles and the cognitive science of religious testimony. Chapter from a book manuscript *A natural history of natural theology*, under contract with MIT Press.

Week 4 Are religious beliefs and practices adaptive?

This week will focus on the hypothesis that religious beliefs and practices are adaptive, focusing on the role of religious practices and beliefs in fostering cooperation within groups.

Readings:

- Purzycki, Ben & Sosis, Richard (2011). Our gods: variation in supernatural minds. In U.J. Frey, C. Störmer, Kai P. Willf (Eds), *Essential building blocks of human nature* (pp. 77–83). Berlin: Springer
- Shariff, Azim, Norenzayan, Ara, & Henrich, Joseph (2010). The birth of high gods. How the cultural evolution of supernatural policing influenced the emergence of complex, cooperative human societies, paving the way for civilization. In M. Schaller, A. Norenzayan, S.J. Heine, T. Yamagishi, & T. Kameda (Eds.), *Evolution, culture, and the human mind* (pp. 179–195). New York and London: Psychology Press.

Week 5 Science and religion: two competing modes of explanation?

What are the similarities and differences between scientific and religious beliefs? How do scientific and religious explanations differ, and are they compatible or incompatible? We will examine McCauley's claim that religious beliefs are natural and scientific beliefs are not, and consider Legare's arguments for the psychological compatibility of religious and scientific modes of explanation.

Readings:

- Legare, Cristine, Evans, E. Margaret, Rosengren, Karl S., & Harris, Paul L (2012). The coexistence of natural and supernatural explanations across cultures and development. *Child Development* 83: 779–793.
- McCauley, Robert (2012). *Why religion is natural and science is not*. Oxford University Press (excerpts).

Week 6 Religious beliefs about human persons: prelife, afterlife, mind and soul

Humans intuitively conceive of themselves as not purely physical beings, but as beings that have (or are) souls or spirits, capable of living on in the afterlife and sometimes also with a pre-existence. Why do we believe in an afterlife? Why do we think of the human mind as distinct from the body?

Readings:

- Bering, Jesse (2006). The folk psychology of souls. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 29: 453–462.

- Hodge, K. Mitch (2008). Descartes' mistake: How afterlife beliefs challenge the assumption that humans are intuitive Cartesian substance dualists. *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 8: 3–4.

Week 7 The experiential component of religion: religious experience and religious practices
Religion has an important experiential component; it relies on practices like prayer and ritualized actions to instill and maintain religious attitudes. This week's discussions will focus on this important dimension of religion, looking at the role of religious practices in maintaining religious beliefs, paying attention to recent anthropological and neuroscientific research.

Readings:

- Luhrmann, Tanya (2012). *When God talks back. Understanding the American evangelical relationship with God*. Vintage (excerpt).
- Schjoedt, Uffe (2009). The religious brain: A general introduction to the experimental neuroscience of religion. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 21: 310–339.

Week 8 The implications of CSR for the rationality of religious beliefs

Does the origin of religious beliefs have any implications for its justification? This class explores justifying and debunking arguments for religious beliefs based on CSR.

Readings:

- John Wilkins & Paul Griffiths (2013). Evolutionary debunking arguments in three domains: fact, value and religion. In G.W. Dawes & J. MacLaurin (Eds), *A new science of religion* (pp. 133–146). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Clark, Kelly & Justin Barrett (2011). Reidian religious epistemology and the cognitive science of religion. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 79, 639–675.