Workshop on New Developments in the Cognitive Science of Religion
hosted by the International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion (IACSR)

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Introduction

The main goal of the workshop is to introduce CSS members to topics that are cutting edge in the cognitive science of religion. The papers draw on a variety of methodologies and disciplines, which is one of the main characteristics of the cognitive science of religion. Even though the focus is on religion, the researchers are involved in broader issues relevant to cognitive science. So the expected audience is cognitive scientists and scientists from other disciplines such as psychology, the study of religion and anthropology, who are interested in cognitive approaches to religion. Since the papers represent ongoing projects, the outcomes of these papers are expected to be publications in peer-review journals.

The International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion (IACSR) seeks to advance the naturalistic study of religion. The IACSR recognizes that the cognitive sciences encompass a wide array of disciplines and methods, including, among others, experimental research in psychology and neuroscience, computational modeling, ethnographic, historical, archaeological, and comparative studies of religious cognition, and the survey techniques of the social sciences. The IACSR also welcomes new cognitive theories of diverse religious phenomena. The IACSR does not promote dialogue between science and religion, attempts to find religion in science and science in religion, or attempts to validate religious or spiritual doctrines through cognitive science. These concerns are better addressed in other forums.

Program

Session 1: Invited presentations
Deeley, Q. (King’s College, London). Modelling possession trance with hypnosis and functional MRI: Possession trance is associated with alterations in the sense of identity and control over behaviour. However, the underlying cognitive and neural mechanisms are unknown. Here we report preliminary findings from a study which employs suggestions in highly hypnotisable subjects and fMRI to create an experimental model of spirit possession, along with neuro-psychiatric syndromes associated with alterations in the agency, awareness, and ownership of actions.

Xygalatas, D. (Princeton University), Bulbulia, J. (Victoria University of Wellington), Kovanelka, I. (Aarhus University), Schjodt, U. (Aarhus University), Jegindo, E.-M. (Aarhus University). Cognitive approaches to a study of fire-walking: Certain high arousal rituals seem to defy cultural evolutionary expectations. They are costly, resist change, and rely on powerful self-deception about utilities. How can we explain the survival of such rituals? This talk presents a study of a Spanish fire-walking ritual. The ritual is performed annually during the festival of San Juan and draws religious and non-religious participants alike. In this study, we use qualitative and quantitative physiological data (heart rate and encephalography) to study the effects of such rituals on a physiological and emotional level. Some of the questions addressed are: Is there a difference between religious and non-religious participants? Does participation in the ritual change the experience of pain? Do the spectators have the same reactions as the participants? Does
participation elicit more pro-social attitudes, leading to increasing group cohesion?

**Session 2: Refereed presentations**

Luhrmann, T. (Stanford University). *Making God Real in Evangelical Christianity*: The most remarkable feature of contemporary experientially oriented evangelical Christianity is that God has become intimate and interactive, best buddy as well as holy majesty. In these churches, congregants are invited to experience a personal relationship with God in which God is person-like. How does a human come to feel God’s presence? This old question gains a new urgency at a moment in our history when God is understood to be so vividly present. This paper offers an answer to this question and develops with greater specificity an anthropological argument that God may become “embodied” for these congregants. I have collected both rich and extensive ethnographic data and enough psychological data to make what I believe to be a powerful argument about the way people learn to experience God in their bodies—an argument for which I suggest that both ethnographic and psychological data are essential.

White, C. *The Natural Foundations of Reincarnation Beliefs*: The apparent variability in the forms of reincarnation beliefs and associated practices across cultures is widely documented in the anthropological literature. Yet when a comparative perspective is adopted, some aspects appear to be remarkably similar. For example, the belief that people can be reborn as humans or animals appears to be more recurrent than the belief that people return to the world as plants or artefacts. Likewise, children and adults are often examined for particular types of distinguishing features such as a birthmark or familiar personality trait to indicate who they were in a previous life. To date, explanations of these similarities appeal to the ‘unique’ cultural contexts within which these ideas are embedded, but do not adequately account for these apparent cross-cultural trends. The aim of my research was to readdress the existing balance by also taking account of what is known about individual-level psychology. In doing so, a number of hypotheses were generated and tested, first among participants in the UK and then in India with members of the Jain community, whose theology appears to contradict the main hypotheses of this dissertation. The results of this research support the claim that in order to successfully account for the spread and emergence of reincarnation beliefs, as well as cultural nuances, one must also consider their psychological foundations.

Van Slyke, J.A. (Fuller Theological Seminary), Reimer, K.S. (Azusa Pacific University). *Working models of divine and human attachments in a computational semantic space*: The present study considered correspondence between working model representations of parental attachment and the divine in three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) using latent semantic analysis (LSA). We hypothesized that cognitive representations of attachment operationalized as narrative descriptions of parental relationships are semantically similar to narrative descriptions of the divine in LSA, a computational knowledge model capable of similarity comparison for words and sentences in a high-dimensional semantic space. Contrary to expectations, we found that there was not a significant relationship between parent and divine representations regardless of religious affiliation. Instead, representations of the divine were more closely related to working models of the self and peer attachment figures than parental attachment figures. Possible reasons for this finding will be discussed, along with the utility of LSA as an empirical innovation for study of social schemas and attachment in the cognitive science of religion.

Taves, A. (University of California—Santa Barbara). *The role of suggestion in the embodiment of other “selves”: Beginning in the mid-eighties anthropologists (Kenny 1986), philosophers (Hacking 1998), and psychologists (Spanos 1996) advanced a sociocognitive model of multiple personality disorder as an alternative to the disease model prevalent among psychiatrists. Adopting a comparative approach that included religious and other cultural phenomena (e.g., possession and UFO abduction), they interpreted these phenomena as products of socially generated role enactments, fantasy-infused autobiographical memories, and hypnotic suggestion (Spanos 1996; Lynn et. al. 2008). Although this research has obvious relevance for understanding religious phenomena, few scholars of religion have attempted to exploit it either to better understand the intersection between the neuro-cognitive and psychosocial aspects of experience or to analyze historical phenomena in ways that might suggest new directions for experimental research. Within this body of research the social and contextual aspects of hypnotic interactions are better understood than the neuro-cognitive ones; specifically, little is known “about the operation of automatic and attentional processes, and how subjects can use effective cognitive strategies, with little or no awareness they are using them, to respond efficiently to suggestion” (Lynn et. al. 2008, 131). Theoretical and experimental research on suggestion can be used to illuminate well-documented historical cases, which in turn can provide longitudinal data with respect to processes of suggestion that result in complex formations of self. This paper compares the role of suggestion in five historical cases.

**Workshop format**

This will be a full day workshop divided into two sessions. The morning session consists of invited presentations by scholars who are currently involved in new approaches to the cognitive science of religion. The afternoon session will consist of the presentation of four submitted papers, selected on the basis of blind refereeing by the IACSR Program Committee. In addition to the papers’ presentation, each will include a brief formal commentary, brief author reply after which comments and questions will be fielded from the audience. The workshop will conclude with a small reception.