**Cognition, Religion, and Science**

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**ABSTRACTS OF PRESENTATIONS**

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| Arun Bala | TRANSCENDING EMIC-ETIC DUALISM:  A PERSPECTIVE FROM MADHYAMIKA BUDDHISM  It is generally recognized that there is a dichotomy in the modes of inquiry adopted by theology to understand religious phenomena. On the one hand theology adopts an “insider” approach that involves a prior commitment to religious beliefs often defended by appeal to faith and revelation; on the other hand theology adopts an “outsider” view that explains religious phenomena by appeal to reason and evidence. Moreover these two approaches are generally seen as involving incompatible modes of inquiry. In this study we use the example of Madhyamika Buddhism to demonstrate that it is actually more fruitful to treat emic and etic approaches as complementary, perspectives which can be combined to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of both religious and scientific thought. Madhyamika Buddhism distinguishes two modes of thought – one based on appeal to the ordinary empirical knowledge and the other on extraordinary experiential knowledge achieved in the altered state of awareness induced by meditation practice. We show that the claims based on experiential knowledge can be explained by the scientific hypothesis that the objects of experiential knowledge have a gestalt structure. This makes sense of many characteristic Madhyamika claims - the doctrines of *sunyata* expressing the participatory structure of perceived objects, the dichotomies of double truth and double reality, and the Madhyamika *catuskoti* with its apparent violation of the laws of logic. It also allows a scientific understanding of Madhyamika experientalism which widens our understanding of scientific empiricism at the same time. |
| Hing Wan Cheng | A FIRST LOOK ON TAOIST EPISTEMOLOGY  A study of brain shows to us that we acquire knowledge through the use of our left brain. Left brain can be understood analogically as a sequential computer that processes information collected at this moment while referencing those stored from the past. This undoubtedly will introduce bias in the understanding of the truth when the historical archive can never be a complete one. This is what Taoism or Lao-Tzu (Laoji, 老子) asks us to avoid. To understand/recognize the external world and subsequently the absolute truth, the use of right brain jumps in. This paper will base on the works of Lao-Tzu and Chang-Tzu (Zhuangji, 莊子), where the author tries to outline the Taoist framework of epistemology. Within the framework, the author concludes that the (Great) Tao is “knowable”, and that the teaching of Taoism is not anti-social or to convert people to become ignorant. Rather, the teaching of Taoism calls for the grasping of knowledge in both mundane and transcendental sense. This is the thing that the framework will help. |
| William Franke | NATURAL COGNITION, UNIVERSALS, AND THE NOTHING OF RELIGION  Cognitivism has followed in the lineage of Socrates and logical thinking that separates thought from nature by creating concepts as artificial objects that are instruments of thought and so can be manipulated by it. Classical Chinese wisdom and apophatic philosophy in the Western tradition together constitute alternative forms of rationality based on immanent and largely implicit critique of the limits of this logical and cognitivist rationality. I follow some of the historical applications of an emergent cognitivist rationality in religion in order to suggest how the object “religion” dissolves itself into nothing and thereby defeats attempts at achieving an adequate cognitive grasp of it and rather invites the approach of apophatic wisdom. The paper proceeds by historicizing the growth of cognitive rationality from ancient to modern Western civilization viewed in an intercultural perspective in order to suggest that a viable universalism should be based not on cognitive universals but rather on precisely what cannot be cognized, on what cannot be comprehended within any given culture’s cognitive scheme. The paper’s theses are developed in dialogue and in dialectic with the views of François Jullien on classical Chinese thought and on the claims for cultural universalism that emanate especially from modern Western thought and civilization. |
| Luther H. Martin | THE RETURN OF SCIENCE: EVOLUTION, COGNITION, AND RELIGION  “The study of religion,” as an independent academic discipline was founded in the mid-nineteenth century in the midst of the scientific spirit then sweeping Europe. In the twentieth century, “religion” because resituated as one of the humanities with a hermeneutical focus on socio-cultural particulars. In the latter part of the twentieth century, however, some historians began to embrace a “return to science.” I would like to suggest some implications associated with that “return” for religious studies, especially with respect to evolutionary theory and to theorizing in the cognitive sciences (which I understand to be framed by evolutionary theory), with brief reference to examples from the history of religion. |
| Robert N. McCauley | WHY RELIGION IS NATURAL AND SCIENCE IS NOT  Pondering the *cognitive* foundations of science and religion offers reasons for highlighting humans’ maturationally natural knowledge. By the time that they reach school age, human beings seem to have knowledge about many important matters that is automatic, that is intuitive, that is based on little, if any, evidence that they can articulate, that does not seem to depend on any culturally distinctive support, and that is, in part, virtually definitive of what constitutes normal human cognitive development. This maturationally natural knowledge plays very different roles in science and religion, whether the focus is on their cognitive *products* or the cognitive *processes* that each engages. Science traffics, usually sooner but always later, in representations and forms of inference that do not rely on the deliverances of maturationally natural capacities. The sciences yield verdicts that largely overthrow the deliverances of these capacities, however persistent and ineradicable they prove in human thought. By contrast, religion, with respect to both the cognitive representations and the inferential processes it engages, depends overwhelmingly on such maturationally natural cognitive systems. Religious representations reliably involve only minor variations on the conceptions that maturationally natural knowledge offers, which renders those representations attention grabbing, memorable, and easy to deploy. Such a comparison of the cognitive foundations of science and religion points to many startling consequences. |
| Mu-chou Poo | EXPERIENCE, IMAGINATION, AND THE BODY OF GHOST:  EXAMPLES FROM ANCIENT CHINA  What does a ghost look like? Does a ghost possess a body? Does it have certain bodily feelings? How do we know it is a ghost?  How shall we deal with ghosts?  People in the past (sometimes even now) often experienced strange phenomena that led them to consider these questions, sometimes seriously, sometimes not so seriously, but always with a certain ambiguity. Questions related to the recognition of ghosts may be stated as the following: one, what are the attributes of ghosts? In other words, we wish to know the factors, be they psychological, physical, or cultural, that inform us to recognize the presence of ghosts; two, do ghosts possess any special bodily features that are either similar or unlike human beings? And why?  This paper tries to answer these two sets of questions by using textual evidence from ancient China, from the pre-imperial period until the Six Dynasties period, because this period saw the earliest appearance and the formation of the concept of ghost. To answer the first set of questions, I shall present information on ghosts, that is, stories or treatises about ghosts, preserved in the texts. In the process of discussing these examples, we can form some idea about how people in ancient China recognized ghosts, and why these perceptions were valid in the contexts of cultural and religious tradition. To answer the second set of questions, I shall use certain exorcistic texts that the ancient Chinese employed to deal with ghosts. From what people did to expel or propitiate ghosts, we may find out how people imagined the feelings or preferences of ghosts, and perhaps part of the reasons why they so imagined, based on our understanding of human cognitive capacities. |
| Edward Slingerland | RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN THE AGE OF CONSILIENCE:  NEW APPROACHES DRAWN FROM THE COGNITIVE AND EVOLUTIONARY SCIENCES  In this talk I will draw upon the case example of early Chinese religious thought to demonstrate how a “consilient” approach to the study of religion can help us make progress on problems that have long concerned us. New content knowledge and new methodologies drawn from the cognitive and evolutionary sciences can help us hone in on plausible interpretative strategies and give us new tools to interrogate our texts. At the same time, the sciences are badly in need of the sort of linguistic, historical and cultural expertise that is the specialty of scholars of religion. A new “second wave” of consilience recognizes the science-humanities cooperation is a two-way street, and points the way toward a future of genuinely productive and collaborative interdisciplinary research. |
| William Waldron | THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGION IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT: TOWARD A DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE COGNITIVE STUDY OF RELIGION AND BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY OF MIND: A YOGĀCĀRA PERSPECTIVE  In this paper we will explore parallels between the cognitive approach to the study of religion and the analyses of mind found in one tradition of Buddhism: the Yogācāra school of Buddhism (瑜伽宗, 法相宗, or 唯識宗) which has flourished in India, Tibet, China and Japan since the 4-7th c. CE. We will identify some of these parallels, interrogate their contents, and examine their differing assumptions and conclusions. Specifically, many cognitive scientists posit that human beings are “innate dualists,” “essentialists” and “naïve realists” (Bloom, *Descartes’ Baby*, Tremlin, *Minds and Gods*). Similarly, Yogācārin Buddhists have long held that we all have unconscious dispositions (*vāsanā*, **習氣)** to see the persons and objects in the world around us as possessing enduring, essential identities (*svabhāva*,自性) and characteristics (*nimitta*, 相). From both of these perspectives, our representations of persons and objects are seen as complex, and largely collective, cognitive constructs rather than as objects existing in and of themselves. Last, a constructive dialogue *between* cognitive science and Buddhism is possible since they both aim to interrogate human experience, religion and culture more deeply and thereby free us from false illusions—even if their ultimate aims differ. |
| Mario Wenning,  Tingting Wu | THE POSTSECULAR TURN IN EDUCATION |
| Donald Wiebe | GLOBALIZATION AND THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGION  Whatever the distinctive cultural, philosophical, psychological, or social roots of modern Western science it has ultimately provided society with superior knowledge of the physical world to that found in traditional societies. Although recognized globally in this limited regard, modern science is not truly a global phenomenon because it has not been assimilated into the fabric of traditional modes of thought, especially with respect to understanding and explaining social and cultural realities. This is particularly evident with respect to the scientific study of religion. My aim in this paper is to try to account for the factors blocking the globalization of a scientific study of religion. |
| Jing Zhu | THE HEAVEN (*TIAN*) AS “BIG GOD”  This talk is divided into three parts. First, I construe the Heaven (Tian, 天) as an overarching religious notion in ancient China. This quasi-personal divine being, as a powerful, omniscient, interventionist, morally concerned god (qualified as a Big God, dubbed by Ara Norenzayan (2013), played a pivotal role in traditional Chinese society. Second, I explore how the concept of the Heaven, as a key element of the Confucian doctrine, worked to promote large-scale social cooperation in ancient China, and was vitally undermined in the late 19th and the early 20th century, under the increasing influence of science and religions introduced from the Western. Third, I examine the social and moral implications of the fall of the Heaven in modern China, and suggest an empirical (experimental) approach to explore whether the concept of the Heaven, still embodied in many aspects of Chinese culture, may have some residual effects on the moral life of ordinary people in contemporary China. |