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Keywords

cognitive science of religion, philosophy of the cognitive science of religion, cognitive theory of religion, cognitive theory of magic

In Religion as Magical Ideology Talmont-Kaminski’s approach to religion consists of three main building blocks reflecting the title: (1) religions have their basis in cognitive by-products; (2) they have a pro-social function and (3) their functionality is not connected to their truth. In this respect, Talmont-Kaminski offers a fresh synthesis of the two approaches which are often viewed as contradictory: the cognitive by-product account and the pro-social adaption account (p. 6). According to the author, the problem with them is that while the cognitive by-product account „fails sufficiently distinguish between religions and magical beliefs, including superstitions,” the pro-social adaptation account „fails to differentiate between religions and other sets of beliefs that motivate pro-social behaviour“ (p. 10). To get over this problem and to make a synthesis possible, it is necessary to adopt the third element as a glue, i.e. the non-alethic function of religious claims shared by religion with ideologies.

The subtitle of the book, How the Supernatural Reflects Rationality, is an indication of its general background as well as of the author’s main original contribution. According to Talmont-Kaminski, one way the book can be understood is as an examination of the relationship between reason and superstition (p. 1, 6). Central to his argument is the discussion of the persisting influence of this dichotomy that originated in the Enlightenment and characterizes modern approaches to the category of the supernatural. Drawing especially on bounded rationality theory, the author tries to overcome the dichotomy while still being faithful to his naturalist epistemological position. This reconfiguration enables him to formulate an important epistemological consequence: supernatural beliefs are products of the same cognitive heuristics that are responsible for what is commonly called rationality.

Chapter 2 discusses at least three areas of persisting influence of the Enlightenment on the relationship between reason and superstition: first, the connection between reason and progress (pp. 20–23); second, the differentiation between natural and human sciences (pp. 23–27); and finally, the link between reason and logic (pp. 27–29). While formulating a naturalistic bottom-up approach to ration-
ality, Talmont-Kaminski is drawing on bounded rationality theory, originally proposed by Herbert Simon, stressing (1) the constrained nature of human cognitive abilities, (2) the role of heuristics while offering satisfying rather than optimizing inferences, and (3) the limitedness of the applicability of those heuristics which depends on particular environmental conditions. Simultaneously, he criticizes Daniel Kahneman’s position, which according to Talmont-Kaminski still retains “a normative account of rationality that is very much in the traditional, Enlightenment camp, and therefore subject to all of the problems with that view” (p. 41).

Chapter 3 focuses on mechanisms underlying supernatural beliefs that support their cultural stability. While approaching the category of supernatural, Talmont-Kaminski uses Pascal Boyer’s concept of counter-intuitive representations as a starting point. Talmont-Kaminski emphasizes that for a cultural success of supernatural beliefs does not only matter how do they fit to human cognition and cultural contents, but also how do they stand up to potential counter-evidence. The impact of it is affected at least by three kinds of issues: content of the beliefs, their social context and their methodological context (p. 44). Here the difference between magic and religion comes to discussion. Generally speaking, “while magical practices are intended to have mundane effects, religious practices are meant to primarily affect the world of supernatural entities and forces” (p. 45). Although in both cases the perceived causal connection is supernatural, mundane outcomes of magical beliefs are much more sensitive to potential counter-evidence, which has a substantial destabilizing effect on them. To stabilize such beliefs within a religious system, it is necessary either transfer them into a super-empirical domain or to limit potential counter-evidence by means of social and methodological contexts.

The general conditions and underlying mechanisms of magical beliefs and practices are discussed in Chapter 4. Malinowski’s original recognition that people are much more influenced by magical beliefs in threatening conditions and the Skinnerian research tradition of accidental operant conditioning are here further explored in evolutionary and cognitive terms of error management theory. The mechanisms of hyperactive agency detection and contagion heuristic are understood as examples of the principle of error management at work (p. 86). But to explore the issue of the acception and stabilization of those beliefs, other insights have to be added to the picture. With reference to Heintz and Mercier, Talmont-Kaminski argues that for a magical belief to be culturally stable it has to be explained in terms of causal connections which are socially convincing (p. 88–89). Further, according to the theory of “credibility-enhancing displays,” put further by Joseph Henrich, in the process of cultural learning a learner is much more susceptible to accept a belief from a model when evidence reflect-
ing correspondence between this belief and model’s behavior is available. The chapter concludes by an exploration of potential responses adopted by millenarian religious movements while facing counter-evidence to their central magical beliefs. One of these responses, explored especially by J. Gordon Melton, is to reinterpret “the belief in such a way as to turn what had been an empirically testable claim into one that is free of such impediment” (p. 93). This transformation of a mundane effect into superempirical one represents a bridge to the issue of religious beliefs explored in following chapter.

Central to Chapter 5 “is the idea that religion should be understood as supernatural ideology, enabling the two different accounts of religion to complement each other” (p. 98). Religion is seen as a magical-religious complex, where the magical element motivates belief in superempirical entities, whereas the religious element uses these entities and forces to motivate pro-social behavior. Although Talmont-Kaminski builds his argument with substantial attention to the work of David Sloan Wilson (see especially pp. 99-103 and pp. 119-122), he does not pay too much attention to Wilson’s controversial group selection account. He follows here much more the co-evolutionary models put forward by Scott Atran and Joseph Henrich, among others (p. 100-101). The discussion then turns to the topic of ideologies and their non-alethic function: The effectiveness of ideologies has “no connection to the accuracy of the claims they make about the world” (p. 107) but rests on their ability to coordinate collective behavior (p. 108-109). In this respect, while using superempirical entities to motivate pro-social behavior, religions represent “examples of the longest lasting ideologies” (p. 114).

The final Chapter 6 is concerned with the process of secularization representing a test case for the dual inheritance account of religion explored in previous chapters. How is it possible that some modern Western societies have found ways to maintain social stability and cohesion without recourse to religion? According to Talmont-Kaminski, a current weakness of religion in these societies “shows that in these environments religion is no longer functional, its role having been taken over by other social institutions that are for the most part much more successful in fulfilling it” (p. 131). To express this process in evolutionary terms, the increasing religious plurality is then a product of decrease in selection pressures (p. 132). Because in the modern, safe living conditions it is of a relatively lower cost to adopt an innovative behavioral strategy, also the credibility-enhancing displays lose their importance on stabilization of magical beliefs (p. 136).

In a concluding section of the last chapter Talmont-Kaminski comes back to the issue of the persisting influence of the Enlightenment’s view on reason. On
the epistemological level, his account gives a new light on any effort either to support or eliminate religion by means of science. Enlightenment was wrong while considering that the progress in science and education will eliminate supernatural beliefs, because “[s]ecularization appears to have much more to do with general conditions of life than with any intellectual considerations” (p. 143). With this conclusion concerning actual epistemological issues, Talmont-Kaminski’s account represents a fresh, alternative voice in the philosophy of the cognitive science of religion today.