

By Way of Introduction

Göran Larsson

University of Gothenburg

Andreas Nordin

University of Gothenburg

Jonas Svensson

Linnaeus University

The building block approach (BBA) to the study of religions and world-views suggested by Ann Taves (Santa Barbara University) and Egil Asprem (Stockholm University) can be seen as a more generally accessible formulation of a larger research program aimed at integrating the sciences and the humanities, often considered “two cultures” in academia. The intellectual grounding of the BBA is shared with a large number of scholars who belong to particular subdivisions of the study of religions, such as the cognitive and evolutionary science of religion and related fields in cognitive anthropology. Indeed, there is a sense in which scholars from these subfields may view the approach as “pushing at an open door”. Nonetheless, we believe that there is indeed a need for more general formulation of the actual underlying research agenda, not least for the purposes of facilitating communication. For example, the editors of this volume have all encountered ambivalence among colleagues towards the above-mentioned approaches to the study of religions. We have chosen to interpret this attitude as a reluctance not to embracing the idea of inter-disciplinarity as such, but to the use of “scientific” language. There may be a need for a less intimidating vocabulary, avoiding such technical terms as “mental modules”, “behavioural scripts”, or “Baysean predictive coding mechanisms in human perception”. The metaphor of “building blocks” may just do the trick.

Could such an approach help in bridging this gap between the humanities and the natural sciences? Is such bridging necessary, or even desirable, given the general philosophy of science in our studies and its epistemological background? Is the call for “conciliation” and “vertical integration” in

the scientific community that underlies the BBA legitimate, or is it merely a covert attempt at academic colonization that threatens the integrity of the humanities as a unique approach to the study of human culture, one focused on interpretation rather than explanation?

In the light of this brief backdrop, the aim of the following collection of texts is twofold. First, we wish to provide a short and user-friendly introduction to the approach formulated by Taves and Asprem. Secondly, we aim to offer a set of responses, discussions and possible applications relating to this approach. Hopefully, we will have inspired some researchers to pursue its adoption. Another possibility is that we have provoked some scholars to write responses and to sharpen their criticisms. Although we hope for the first response, we also think that all good scientific research is based on critical discussions and debates. Any response will help us to advance the study of religions, things deemed to be religious and other special things, as Taves usually puts it.

As a starting point for this volume, we asked Taves and Asprem to provide a background to how and when the BBA was developed and why they thought it necessary to develop this way of thinking about religion. To put it differently, what kinds of questions does their approach answer and what kinds of gaps in earlier research does it fill? Although this brought several difficult questions into the discussion, we asked Taves and Asprem to keep the introduction short, simple and as user-friendly as possible. For those who are interested a more elaborate presentation of the BBA is available in Taves' own book, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton, 2009; reprinted in 2011). This provides the necessary scientific background to the BBA and shows how it relates to earlier research and to other scientific fields, especially the cognitive science of religion and evolutionary studies of religions.

Disposition and Outline

The volume opens with an introduction by Taves and Asprem, followed by six responses to the BBA and suggestions for its application.

The introduction is followed by Göran Larsson's chapter, which provides an overview and assessment of how Taves' and Asprem's theoretical and methodological suggestions have been received by the academic community. The aim of Larsson's chapter is to help the reader who is encountering the BBA for the first time to assess the pros and cons that have been identified by other researchers. Furthermore, Larsson aims to show how difficult it is to bridge the gaps that exist between different philosophies of science in academia and why it is so difficult to achieve conciliation.

Laura Feldt's chapter does not test the BBA or use it as such. Instead her chapter questions and discusses the BBA from the perspective of the broader study of religion, focusing especially on the role of the media, materiality, and emotions, in the investigation of fantastic stories in ancient religions such the Mesopotamian, as well as contemporarily, in studies of religion and popular culture. Feldt encourages further discussion in the general study of religions between specialists in the cognitive science of religion and other historians of religion.

In his chapter, Andreas Nordin discusses the BBA from the perspective of some common standard methodological assumptions in the broader subfield of the cognitive and evolutionary science of religion and cognitive anthropology that suggest a piecemeal and "fractionated" understanding of so-called religious phenomena. This topic is addressed by defending the notion that the cognition of supernatural dreaming is a pervasive part and consequently a building block of religious experience and tradition.

Ingela Visuri's chapter presents an empirical and methodological example of an interdisciplinary study of religious cognition that is closely aligned to the BBA suggested by Taves and Asprem. While autism is the focal point of Visuri's research, the chapter also highlights a generational shift in the ascription of non-ordinary powers, which in these millennials appears to depart from occult phenomena in Western popular culture. Visuri argues that this cultural and temporal influence on religious cognition surfaces due to the mixing of methods and scientific approaches, and that such interdisciplinary designs enable researchers to observe a single phenomenon from multiple perspectives.

Jonas Svensson's chapter is an attempt to explore the usefulness of the BBA to the study of Islam by applying a theory of a building block type (Moral Foundations Theory) to a topic that falls well within the classical boundaries of the study of religions, namely Qur'an translations. Utilizing methods developed elsewhere to quantify moral foundations in texts with the help of computers, Svensson searches for possible patterns in the translations and considers how these patterns may be related to previous, ongoing, and future research within the field of Islamic studies.

F. LeRon Shults's chapter focuses on the second main problem the BBA was designed to solve – achieving conciliation – and the role that reverse engineering and predictive processing are supposed to play in fulfilling this transdisciplinary task. Shults argues that one of the best ways of analysing and explaining "complex cultural phenomena in terms of the constituent parts that interact to produce them" (p. 101) is provided by new techniques in computer modelling and simulation. The overall goal is to describe some of the ways in which these methodological tools can

contribute to Taves' and Asprem's call for epistemological bridges to be constructed between the sciences and the humanities.

The volume ends with a chapter giving Taves and Asprem the opportunity to respond to the responses, applications, and suggestions presented in this book.

All the chapters described above have been written by scholars from Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. The restrictions on this selection are due to the composition of the initial workshop venue where draft versions of the final chapters were presented, except for F. LeRon Shults's text, which was added later. We nonetheless hope that the book may serve as an introduction for a wider audience in both Europe and North America, stimulating further debate, responses and critical discussion.

About the Editors

Göran Larsson is a Professor in the study of religions at the University of Gothenburg. His main research focus is Islam and Muslims in Europe, both past and present, but he also has a general interest in theoretical and methodological questions concerning the study of humans, especially with regard to religion. Besides these topics, Larsson has also conducted research on global conflicts and how they impact on Swedish society. He has published several books, chapters and articles with international publishing houses, for example, Brill, Routledge, Springer, and Ashgate.

Andreas Nordin has a PhD in social anthropology, is an Associate Professor of Religious Studies, and a Lecturer in the Department of Cultural Sciences, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Nordin's primary areas of research interest are cognitive and evolutionary anthropology, moral psychology, honour and reputation, religious cognition, and the cognitive science of religion.

Jonas Svensson is a professor in the study of religions at Linnaeus University. He specializes in Islamic studies, and has of late taken a particular interest in integrating the cognitive science of religion into his research field, as well as in ways in which to utilize computers and programming in humanistic research.