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Religious Narrative, Cognition and Culture: Image and Word in the Mind of Narrative
(Religion, Cognition, and Culture). Edited by Armin W. Geertz and Jeppe Sinding
Jensen. Sheffield: Equinox, 2011. v + 336 pp. ISBN 978-1—84553-295-6 (pbk.)

Although this is not the first volume in the Religion, Cognition, and Culture Series, it
nonetheless reflects the origins of the series and the program of the same name at the
University of Aarhus. As noted in the preface, the volume emerged out of a two-year
research project led by the faculty in the Department of the Study of Religion between
2002 and 2004. Most of the papers in the volume originated as papers at either the
conference on "Image and Word in the Mind of Narrative" in 2003 or the conference on
"Religious Narrative, Cognition, and Culture" in 2004 and, thus, a few are somewhat
dated. Reflecting its status as the first religious studies program to embrace a cognitive
approach, the volume takes up a topic – narrative – that is both integral to the study of
religion and well suited to highlight the interplay between cognition and culture.
Narrative, the editors argue, is not only a key to the complex relations between minds and
social worlds but also a topic that highlights the formative effects of cultural knowledge.

The volume is comprised of three sections. In the first section, each of the editors offers
a theoretical perspective on religious narrative, cognition, and culture. Geertz's essay
focuses primarily on characterizing narrative, arguing that narratives lie at the center of
"a matrix of relations between individuals, groups, cultural repertoires and social
institutions" (p. 23) that can be studied at various levels: linguistic, which focuses on the
structure of the narrative; psycholinguistic, which focuses on the social and pragmatic
contexts of narration; and the neurobiological and the social psychological, which focus
on the role of narrative in regulating our experience of ourselves and others. Jensen's
essay focuses more on features of religious narrative. In contrast to those who define
religion primarily in terms of "minimally counter-intuitive agents," Jensen approaches
religion in terms of "world-making" both physical and imaginative (p. 38), stressing the
crucial role that narrative plays in creating "shared, collective imaginary worlds" (p. 45).
The emphasis on world making provides a particularly apt approach to narrative,
highlighting important parallels between fictional and religious worlds.

The second section illustrates five different levels of explanatory interpretation in more
depth. Although three of the five chapters are edited versions of earlier publications, the
section effectively brings together an eminent set of researchers each of whom argues for
an intimate relation between cognition and culture at a different level of analysis:
Terrence Deacon addresses the neural correlates of language; Merlin Donald, the
phylogenic and cultural origins of language in cognitive communities; Chris Sinha, the
links between cognition and the genesis of the "social imaginary"; Rukmini Bhaya Nair,
the co-creation of narratives at the semantic level; and Ilkka Pyysiäinen, the role of ritual
in transforming imagined agents in seemingly real ones and, thus, in transforming
"fiction" into "religion." Nair's consideration of novelists, such Pynchon, Lodge, and
especially Rushdie, whose fiction elicited death threats from religious leaders, highlights
the volatile relations between fiction and religion. Pyysiäinen attempts to explain the
difference. Drawing from the work of Daniel Wegner, he highlights three things that
tend to make something seem real: perceptual detail, emotional impact, and

uncontrollability. He hypothesizes that some rituals produce these sorts of effects. Good fiction, however, can also produce these effects and can also seem real, which suggests that these most likely are not the features that distinguish fictional from religious worlds. The crucial question is why we can feel as if the characters in a play or a novel are real, but "know" that they are not and, at the same time, "know" that deities who may seem less real nonetheless exist.

The final eleven essays illustrate different cognitive approaches to the study of specific religious narratives. In some cases, cognitive approaches simply provide another analytical perspective on a case study and, in that sense, don't break with usual practice in the humanities. Many of the essays, in other words, argue for a complex interplay between religion, cognition, and culture, but in doing so offer an interpretation of a narrative text or practice without really demonstrating what such an approach tells us that we didn't already suspect.

Two chapters, however, do a particularly good job of demonstrating how research on cognition and culture can take us beyond practice as usual in the humanities. Both start by identifying a problem that needs to be solved and then demonstrate how research on culture and cognition can offer a solution. Anders Lisdorf reassesses the analogy between maps and mythic narratives presupposed by Mircea Eliade and J. Z. Smith in their now classic discussions of the Australian myth of Numbakulla (aka the "Arunta") in light of research in neurology, robotics, and cognitive science. He argues that their assumptions about maps and wayfinding more generally do not hold in light of this research and that a different understanding of the relationship between space, narrative, and religion is required. Through a reanalysis of the primary account, he argues that the myth is not simply a pattern or an etiological description, but rather "an intricate network of landmarks, physical, psychological and social, that serves not as a [cognitive or representational] map, but as a [embedded and enacted] tool for navigating the environment" (p. 260).

Gudmundur Ingi Markússen starts with the fact of an extraordinary increase in the size of a neo-pagan denomination – the Ásatrú -- in Iceland in the 1990s relative to other marginal denominations (Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Baha'i), whose growth was unremarkable. He explained the growth of the one, but not the others, as a response to the image crisis in the national Lutheran state church during this same decade. He argues that Ásatrú, as a homegrown neo-pagan denomination, shared in the national narrative along with the state church, in a way that the imported groups did not. This difference, he argues, points to culture as a causal factor in this case, a finding that contrasts with what some cognitivists (e.g. Boyer, Pyysiäinen) would have predicted.

Two other chapters advance our understanding of the relationship between alternative and everyday worlds. Thomas Sjöblom does so by picking up on the question of what makes a belief true for someone, elaborating on the role of emotional relevance in "pumping intuitions" (drawing from Daniel Dennett) that are conveyed through narrative. Narrative, thus, becomes "the perfect tool for communicating representations that cannot be approached empirically or logically" (p. 168). He illustrates this point in relation to

taboos, an early Irish cultural practice, which, he argues, were made compelling for early Irish audiences through "the emotional power invested in traditional tales" (p. 169). He suggests that religious traditions most likely rely so heavily on narrative for communication because "emotional commitments to certain representations and their truthfulness [are] essential when other criteria of evaluation, such as empirical testing or logic, cannot be used" (p. 171). Thus, in this example, narratives that drew people into an emotionally compelling alternative world intuitively pumped emotional commitments to taboos that people then carried over into the everyday world. By focusing on early Irish narratives in a context that did not make an explicit distinction between religion and literature, Sjöblom is able to sidestep the question of how cultures that do make that distinction create it in practice.

Kenneth Hansen's analysis of virtual rituals in 3D cyberspace allows us to engage this last question more deeply. Drawing on Lawson and McCauley's generative theory of religious rituals to analyze a wedding and other rituals in cyberspace, he proposes a generative theory of virtual rituals with the following rules: the "avatar rule," which specifies that "virtual rituals are performed by agents represented as avatars"; the "epoché rule," which specifies that "the agents must activate and maintain a special Epoché," in which they "oscillat[e] between two reduced states of consciousness over time"; and the "utopia rule," which specifies that "the performance implies the reference to a place outside the world" (pp. 312-315, 318). While some, including Lawson and McCauley, might want to distinguish between religion and cyberspace on the basis of the first rule, such that religion involves "culturally postulated superhuman agents" and cyberspace involves avatars, the editors' and Hansen's use of a "world making" definition directs our attention to third rule, which is presupposed by religion, fiction, and cyber-realities and, thus, does not differentiate between them. This brings us to the second rule, which in my view is the most interesting. In each case, we can ask how the relationship between the alternative and everyday worlds is negotiated. When people oscillate between two or more "worlds," whether religious, fictional, or cyber worlds, how does the alternative world intersect with the everyday? Here I think we would find differences within types of alternative worlds. Not all religions or religious persons negotiate the relationship between religious and everyday worlds in the same way. Some enter the religious world only at special times; others attempt to bring the religious world into the everyday world, sometimes virtually eclipsing the everyday world. Conversely fandom networks bring fiction, films, and television characters into the everyday world and into cyberspace. Hansen describes a gathering of people involved in the cyberworld in regular space, in which the main imperative was to maintain the "epoché rule" by staying in their avatar roles even though the role was not mediated by technology (p. 319). Further analysis of the way in which people use cognitive and social mechanisms not only to create and maintain alternative worlds but also to negotiate between alternative and everyday worlds promises to provide a deeper understanding of how people distinguish between "reality" and "fiction" in and between "worlds."

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