

Helen de Cruz and **Ryan Nichols**, eds. *Advances in Religion, Cognitive Science, and Experimental Philosophy*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016. vi + 221 pp.

Does the critical study of religion make its practitioners lose their faith? Inquiry into the proofs for God's existence inevitably leads to agnosticism, as no such proof exists. If, however, we use the scientific method, and run an experiment on how philosophers of religion evaluate natural theological arguments for the existence of God, we could ask whether their belief or unbelief shape evaluation of natural theological arguments.

This is exactly what Helen de Cruz and Johan de Smedt have done in a study found in this valuable anthology. They conclude: "Majority of philosophers of religion are theists" (135). They describe how philosophers of religion have chosen their field of specialization: "Self-selection might play a role in who decides to specialize in philosophy of religion: philosophers who believe that God exists might be more motivated to study the field than those who do not. After all, if God exists, philosophy of religion is one of the most important areas of philosophy" (ibid.).

If only for this sentence, everyone should read this accessible and technically competent book. The book entices philosophers to engage in the study of religion as it traces the link between the cognitive science of religion and the empirical philosophy of religion to traditional material, both theistic and atheistic. The philosophy of religion can no longer be indifferent to empirical and experimental studies on religion, and it can no longer merely debate with the evidence but also produce new methods of engaging the scientific challenges to religious belief.

The anthology is useful for it tells us the current definition of philosophy of religion: "Philosophy of religion examines questions

about the existence and nature of God and other religious entities and about religion as a cultural and cognitive phenomenon.” Thomas Aquinas, one of the earliest practitioners of the discipline, thought that there were three sources of religious knowledge: reasoning, sacred texts, and tradition. Modern philosophy of religion emphasizes reason and science as key sources (1).

The work asserts that the study of religion must involve the Cognitive Science of Religion: “CSR scholars hold that religious beliefs and practices are typically the result of evolved, ordinary cognitive biases and processes. A common dictum in CSR is that religion is natural” (4). Admittedly, natural as an idea is polysemic. CSR adherents, however, mean that unlike scientific knowledge, basic religious beliefs such as belief in life after death can be easily acquired through cultural evolution, which happens mostly in childhood and does not demand high cognitive effort (4). John Wilkin’s essay entitled “Is Religion or Science Debunked by the Evolution of Cognitive Faculties?” understands possessing religious beliefs as undergoing an off-track process: “An “off-track process” is a process of the evolution by natural selection of cognitive dispositions or belief acquisition, in which what makes the dispositions or beliefs . . . fit is decoupled from its truth.” For example, people in religious communities adhere to their beliefs not because they are convinced of the veracity of their beliefs, but because having the same beliefs as their fellows allows for greater “reciprocal altruism in times of need” (20).

The book elucidates the limitations of the traditional practice of the philosophy of religion, describing it as: “too intellectualist (focused on beliefs), too insular (not enough engagement with other disciplines), and too narrow in the range of religious traditions that are typically discussed” (13). As a theist philosopher of religion, I would rather “take these criticisms to heart” than to contest them

straightaway. As the philosophy of religion engages the questions of CSR, the point is not only to develop the field but religious practice itself.

Despite the obvious discontinuity CSR takes from the classical and medieval sources, it nevertheless forms a continuity with them. “The Death We Fear is Not Our Own: The Folk Psychology of Souls Revisited and Reframed” has an extended discussion on Epicurus; “How do Philosophers Evaluate Natural Theological Arguments” shows that CSR is not interested in debunking the claims of natural theological arguments, but in showing that there’s an aspect to it [natural theological arguments] that can be explored through cognitive science. CSR’s claims obviously pose formidable challenges to the truth claims of traditional arguments, but as scientific discipline, it presupposes that while people’s beliefs (religious or not) may have cultural, sociological, and evolutionary explanations, a clear delineation remains between those explanations and the rationale of the traditional arguments.

The anthology advances the study of religion because it uses the methods of science and genealogy to clarify the space for the reliance on science within the history of ideas: “We are concerned here with the cognitive aspect of religion, as a belief-producing process.” While CSR’s intention differs from genealogy, it participates in its over-all project: “However, at least one sociological account has been given of the belief-producing aspect of religion: Marx’s notion of ‘false consciousness’ and its heirs and successors.” Marx’s analyses of religion as an analgesic naturalizes religion. EDA [evolutionary debunking argument], however, goes a step further, and explains the nature of religion through evolution. CSR’s project, simply put, is akin to genealogy: “Evolutionary accounts are only one kind of genealogical account and evolutionary

accounts include both sociological and biological explanations of religion” (26).

The book, therefore, asks the radical question: “in the light of CSR results, are religious beliefs less likely to be reasonable, justified, or warranted? How if at all do CSR results challenge religious beliefs?” The essays included discuss the answers scholars have already presented: “There are three broad responses to the question of what, if anything, we can conclude from the evolutionary origins of religion and its psychological function.” *Evolutionary debunking arguments* propose that the rationality of religion weakens as CSR uncovers the psychological conditions of believers. *Evolutionary justifications of religious belief*, on the other hand, use CSR to argue for theological claims by giving empirical data. The third group of scholars argue that “the etiology of religious beliefs is irrelevant for their epistemic standing” (7).

A theist reads this work not so much to present counter arguments for whatever claims it might have, which certainly will be produced by “apologists.” The book presents a broader development in philosophy, namely, experimental philosophy and empirical philosophy. Theistic philosophers should take these developments seriously, for it gives a second lease on life to the Humanities, whose conclusions continue to be required to have empirical basis. There is indeed a need to do a sociological study of where most believers are. Are religious believers interested in the truth and increasingly interested in values such as justice and equality? Gender and diversity form a large part of the discussions of the essays. The genealogy of CSR itself, which in understanding the “reasons” people have for their religious beliefs, will tell us that these reasons are not altogether rational. How people in dire straits think divergently from those in religious houses and air-conditioned

libraries need to be articulated even more. Does, however, an empirical evidence necessarily make CSR more reasonable? If one gives empirical evidence that a belief is adhered to for reasons other than the cogency of the argument, is that necessarily more reasonable?

The task here is not for religious thinkers to engage the empirical philosopher in a debate *per se*. The philosopher of religion is not engaged in these questions for purely philosophical reasons. He or she has already made a “fundamental option” (or a conscious option?) to believe in God, and so has launched on an intellectual journey. The question is not how I, as a theist, argue against the challenges CSR presents to religious belief, but what the place is of these challenges to my own option to believe in a Christian God in the age of diversity (Apropos is the essay: “The Explanatory Challenge of Religious Diversity”). Furthermore, the study has no developed definition of belief and it does not clarify how religious beliefs are related to scientific beliefs. The index has no entry on belief, and gleaning from the portions that discuss religious beliefs, the book regards only the content of belief (*terminus ad quem*) and not the subjective side of it (*terminus a quo*). How does CSR explain the continued evolution within religious communities that have known dissent and innovation (cf. the phenomenon of emergent religions)? Arguably, the foregoing difficulties arise because the anthology presents belief and unbelief as hermetic positions rather than as dialectical and mutually beneficial. In other words, having studied religious belief as objective phenomenon, the CSR method might presuppose that unbelief itself is outside the process of belief acquisition. We find, however, a body of empirical studies in psychology of religion on the value of doubt to personal development and well-being. There exist believers who became scientifically conscious. Rather than aiming to verify, they followed

the process of falsification. At the outset, they asked themselves the question: what if one debunked his own belief through scientific evidence (e. g. what sort of archaeological evidence would disprove the Resurrection of Jesus)? This conscious believer, however, does not stop there. Realizing that what one had was an opinion held *despite* the lack of scientific evidence, would he or she find a “truth” in religious propositions that transcends rationalism itself? Could science itself enter the next phase of its evolution?

This excellent volume is important because it makes us wonder about the kind of philosophical training future generations of theistic philosophers of religion should have. While they should have the spirit of an apologist (*defensor fidei*), such defense must be to learn from CSR. An anti-scientific mind set would not do for our age nor would it serve the evolutionary purposes of religion itself. The systematic and critical study of religion does *not* make unbelievers of its practitioners. However theists shall confront cognitive science of religion, it will be for the greater evolution not only of religion but of nature itself.

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