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An Inquiry into the Diverse Articulations of Science & Religion in Contemporary Life

Review by Priscila Santos da Costa

Religion and Science as Forms of Life: Anthropological Insights into Reason and Unreason

by Carles Salazar & Joan Bestard (eds)

Berghahn Books, 2015

Religion and Science as Forms of Life: Anthropological insights into Reason and Unreason is volume edited by Carlos Salazar and Joan Bestard, and published in 2015. The main purpose of the book is to present the reader to the different ways in which science and religion relate to each as ‘forms of life’, that is, as a way of engaging with the world, instead of as a “set of propositions which is what the analysis of a theory or a doctrine involves” (p. 4). According to the editors, this perspective would allow for an understanding of how these forms articulate and affect people’s lives, instead of simply considering them in complete opposition to, or mutually exclusive of one other. The volume is comprised of eleven chapter organized into three parts, “Cognition”, “Beyond Science”, and “Meaning Systems”.

The first part, “Cognition”, is composed of three chapters, mainly tackling the issue of why religious and, sometimes, magical beliefs persist in modern societies. The authors write from the standpoint of cognitive science in order to explain how this could be so, even with the advancement of scientific reason and of its valued moral position in the western world. In the first chapter, Robert N. McCauley argues that religious thinking benefits from the fact that it dwells upon and is propelled by what he defines as “maturationally natural cognitive processing” (p. 28), which are ways of thinking that are spontaneously developed in all human beings, such as the ability to learn and understand language, to socially interact and to automatically react to dangerous situations. Scientific representations, on the

other hand, would go against natural cognition and its common-sense assumptions, requiring years of formal learning and training from individuals.

In “Scientific vs. Religious ‘Knowledge’ in Evolutionary Perspective” (chapter 2), Michael Blume makes use of evolutionary theory to claim that religiosity is a fundamental element to human development and should not simply be viewed as an inferior type of knowledge when compared to science. Religious beliefs develop and enhance pro-social human behaviour individually, socially and institutionally, which is of special importance to setting the grounds from which rational cognition might later evolve. Based on that, Blume concludes by arguing that instead of treating science and religion as exclusive modes of knowing, one should understand that both are legitimate, yet different, ways of approaching reality. In chapter 3, Jesper Sørensen draws on Malinowski’s work to ground his evolutionist claim that men resort to magic as means of offsetting danger and uncertainty. The author backs up this position by showing how our cognitive system reacts in face of ritualistic behaviour: attention to performance, redundancy and clear casual cues lead us to perceive ritual efficacy, even if there is no actual attainment of goals. Sørensen then states that given the fact that modernity presents its own risks, and some of them taking “the form of evolutionary recurrent cues of danger” (p. 78), the realization that ritual and magic as means of confronting those are still found in Western societies should not come as a surprise.

Part two, “Beyond Science”, is the longest section of the book, comprising of five chapters throughout which science and religion are presented as moral landscapes that participate in each other’s construction and definition. In chapter 4, “Moral Employments of Scientific Thought”, Timothy Jenkins focuses on how scientific knowledge has been incorporated and transformed outside its own context, such as religious movements that sprang during the 20th century and popular science best-sellers like *The Da Vinci Code* (Brown 2004) and *The God Delusion* (Dawkins 2006). Jenkins refers to these appropriations as being 'moral' because they serve the purpose of answering to questions about the human condition, such as the existence of good and evil and “explanation[s] of how the world operates and what is humanity’s place in it” (p. 101) – fictions that the author refers to as ‘theodicies’.

Chapter 5, “Social Life of Concepts: Public and Private ‘Knowledge’ of Scientific Creationism”, written by Simon Coleman, draws on his ethnographic work among Christians in the UK to argue that there are different ways in which creationism is conceptualised as knowledge. Coleman’s informants were not particularly interested in engaging with creationism, especially in public discussions, and they

were also not pleased with the idea of it being taught in secular contexts, away from the church and family. In contrast, when discussions about creationism go to the public realm, it is usually initiated by religious detractors, who already present it as an illegitimate form of knowledge. In the process of presenting religious views as such, Coleman argues, science (or rather, its advocates) is also creating a nascence of sorts, namely by not taking into consideration how believers experience creationism, and subsequent knowledge produced about it by other sciences, such as anthropology. In “The Embryo, Sacred and Profane” (chapter 6), Marit Melhuss compares political debates that took place in the UK and in Norway in order to analyse how science, politics and religion relate to each other and position themselves while trying to grasp the moral status of the embryo. Rather than being simply a biological entity, the embryo has its meaning constantly changed by its insertion in broader discussions about purpose and use. The ways in which the embryo is conceptualised – for its generative or reproductive capacities – will inform political positions taken by the State, for example. These positions, however, are not only defined by science, but will also reach and be influenced by other sources, such as religion. In this sense, Melhuss argues that the embryo, while being defined by these different worldviews, is also the entity that causes them to converge and overlap.

In “The Religions of Science and the Sciences of Religion in Brazil” (chapter 7), Roger Sansi highlights the intertwined history of sciences and religion in Brazil. Sansi describes how scientists defined their own field by a double movement of creating a gap between their field and the so-called religions of science (such as spiritualism) and of defining “pure” religions as science’s object of study. According to the author, while forms of knowledge such as spiritualism, and its mixing of religion and science, would present a menace to the modernist and European project of purification/objectification of western (scientific) culture, African religions, such as *candomblé*, and their placement as a belief of “others” is perfectly suitable for it.

Chapter 8, “Science in Action, Religion in Thought: Catholic Charismatics’ Notions about Illness”, written by Maria Coma, draws on her fieldwork among Catholic charismatics’ healing sessions in Spain. Based on her informants’ accounts, Coma shows how science, and biomedicine, more specifically, features in healing testimonies. According to her, believers do not exclude biomedicine and its means of curing illnesses, but rather, they encompass and incorporate this knowledge, subjecting it to a broader moral framework in which God is ultimately responsible for the healing process. Coma observes that, when considered as technology, that is, as a tool for God’s ends, science is in no opposition to religion, but rather a facilitator of religious deeds.

The third part of the volume, “Meaning System,” comprises the three last chapters of the book. Here, the authors focus on how meaning is created and its place in people’s lives, instead of concentrating on the way science and religion are articulated in specific social contexts. In “On the Resilience of Superstition” (chapter 9), João de Pina-Cabral explores the possibility of a different understanding of concepts such as those of ‘belief’ and ‘superstition’, by introducing the notion of “participation”, proposed by Lévy-Bruhl (p. 175). Pina-Cabral’s aim is to move from an anthropological position that considers belief as a set of propositions about the world to one that sees it as an embodied practice through which humans make sense of their everyday life. In the same vein, Tom Inglis, in chapter 10, argues that more important than grasping whether or not beliefs are incongruent to each other, is understanding how at each moment they are put to use. Based on interviews carried out among Irish Catholics, Inglis concludes that, for most of them, there is no problem in articulating magical, religious and scientific beliefs. Rather, different kinds of knowledge were put to work according to their different needs and purposes, and the important thing was to sustain meaning and coherence in their lives.

In chapter 11, “Can the dead suffer trauma? Religion and Science after the Vietnam War”, Heonik Kwon extends the discussion about the centrality of meaning in everyday life by analysing how the Vietnam war differently impacted Vietnamese and American societies. Kwon describes how, during the 1990s, Vietnamese communities started making sense of the traumatic experience of war by performing commemorative death rituals to those killed during it as a means of liberating their souls, trapped as they were in perpetual suffering. The author contrasts this practice to, on the one hand, earlier attempts by the Vietnamese State to situate war efforts and loss within the context of nationalistic sacrifice; and, on the other, to the medicalization of traumatic personal experiences through the official recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder in the United States.

Religion and Science as Forms of Life: Anthropological Insights into Reason and Unreason brings together various theoretical positions from which to consider how forms of knowledge are articulated, opposed or mingled together, and their impact in different social settings. It is of special interest for academics in the field of anthropology and sociology of religion, but it can also be of particular relevance to anyone interested in analyses that explore the categories of ‘superstition’ and ‘belief’.

References Cited

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