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## Response article | Western esotericism and cognitive science of religion

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### 1. Introduction: Cognitive Science of Religion and Western Esotericism

Why would cognitive science be relevant for history of religion or historiography in general and the study of western esotericism in particular? Two problems initially materialize when addressing this question. The first pertains to the concrete material analyzed by the historian and the relation between synchronic and diachronic analysis. Cognitive science studies the mechanisms of the human mind, so why can theories and models from this field possibly help the historian establish diachronic relations between discrete ideas and persons, and aid the analysis of mind-external material (texts and other material artifacts)? The second problem pertains to the relation between the particular and the universal. Studies of western esotericism aim at eliciting a particular and rather unique range of ideas allegedly constituting a counter-cultural (European) tradition. That is, it aims to understand something that is particular, whereas cognitive science is preoccupied with unraveling what is universally human. The question is, how theories and approaches aimed at the universal can enlighten the study of the particular without thereby eradicating the very uniqueness used to establish the field of inquiry in the first place.

These two problems reveal a tension between a nomothetic approach that is inherently universalistic and synchronic in its attempt to explain general features of the human mind and an ideographic approach seeking to interpret the diachronic unfolding of particular and historically embedded discursive universes. Much ink has been spent on this question<sup>1</sup> and I shall not enter into this essentially epistemological discussion at length here. A few general observations are needed, however, before going into a more focused discussion of each of the three articles at hand.<sup>2</sup>

First off it must be emphasized, that *all* historical studies – not only those drawing on the cognitive science of religion – are built upon more or less implicit assumptions of how the human mind works. In fact, all studies that aim to fully describe, interpret, or explain any delineated range of human behavior, or their products, are necessarily informed by psychological models (as well as sociological models, but that is a far less contentious issue). For example, the insistence that human agency ultimately underlies historical events is exactly what distinguishes historiography from natural history. More to the point, any attempt to understand or explain patterns of *transmission* of ideas over time must necessarily build upon one or more models specifying the boundary conditions or constraints of such transmission imposed by human cognitive architecture.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, studies addressing the diffusion of particular types of ideas within a given population build upon assumptions pertaining to psychologically relevant features such as memorability, complexity, and the experiential dimension of the ideas transmitted, as well as the receivers' (implicit) representations of the relative credibility of the person from

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<sup>1</sup> On the relation between nomothetic and ideographic approaches in the study of religion, see Jensen, *The Study of Religion in a New Key*.

<sup>2</sup> For a more thorough discussion of the relation between psychological, sociological and historical explanations, see Sørensen, "Past Minds".

<sup>3</sup> Heintz, "Cognitive History and Cultural Epidemiology".

which any given information is obtained. Thus, not all ideas are equally well transmitted, and their success to a large extent depends on *how* the concept is constructed as well as representations about their *source* all aspects that points to psychological mechanisms.

Unfortunately, the inevitability of some degree of psychological modeling is seldom recognized within historical studies of religion, even if this deplorable situation is being amended in some recent studies and in a new dedicated journal.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the decision by *Aries* to dedicate a special issue to investigate the possible utilization of cognitive approaches within the study of western esotericism should be warmly welcomed. The three contributors to this issue should be acknowledged for demonstrating, how cognitive approaches can add valuable insights and complement more established methods of inquiry.

The first thing that strikes a reader going through the three contributions is the width of cognitive theorizing applied. This points to the important lesson that cognitive science is an interdisciplinary endeavor that is anchored in a number of separate “mother-disciplines” (e.g., psychology, anthropology, linguistics, neuroscience); and that the field is marked by a number of theoretical disagreements. Some of these disagreements have made their way into the cognitive science of religion itself. Thus, the “Standard Model” proposed by scholars such as Pascal Boyer, Scott Atran, Stewart Guthrie, and Justin Barrett has been criticized for being “culture-blind”, that is, for ignoring the effects of the cultural milieu on cognitive processing, in favor of eliciting the universal and largely innately specified mechanisms underlying religious beliefs and rituals. On the other hand, studies taking their point of departure in connectionist, linguistic, and cultural models of human cognition have focused on the role of particular social and cultural contexts in the formation of religious ideas and how the structure of conceptual systems inform and potentially constrain individuals’ cognizing<sup>5</sup>. Thus, whereas the Standard Model has been extremely helpful in establishing the theoretical objects investigated in comparative religion (e.g. “religious concepts”, “ritualization”, “magic”), and thus more firmly grounding our categories in universal properties of the human mind, fine-tuned studies of particular historical and cultural phenomena aimed to elicit unique historical crystallizations and trajectories have found more help in cognitive theories modeling particular conceptual configurations.<sup>6</sup> The contributions in this theme issue all draw on cognitive science of religion from the second, culture-sensitive research tradition.

## **2. CSR and Esoteric Experience: Asprem’s article on a Predictive Coding Approach to Kataphatic Practice**

Within a culturally oriented cognitive science of religion, differences in explanatory goals can be envisioned as stretched out along a continuum between an experiential

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., Whitehouse and Martin (eds.), *Theorizing Religions Past*, Martin and Sørensen (eds.), *Past Minds; Journal of Cognitive Historiography*. Recently, a number of “grand theories” have appeared that integrate evolutionary and cognitive theorizing with historiography. See, for instance, Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*; Norenzayan, *Big Gods*.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Geertz, ‘Ethnohermeneutics’; idem, ‘Brain, Body, and Culture’; Geertz & Jensen (eds.), *Religious Narrative, Cognition and Culture*; Jensen, ‘Normative Cognition in Culture and Religion’; Slingerland, *Effortless Action*; Sørensen, ‘Theosophy’; idem, ‘Magic among the Trobrianders’.

<sup>6</sup> D’Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology*; Holland and Quinn, *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*; Shore, *Culture in Mind*, Strauss and Quinn, *A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning*.

and a cultural-discursive pole. Around the experiential pole explanations focus on how (religious) cultural information influences the neurocognitive processes underlying experiences of individuals. In his article, ‘Explaining the Esoteric Imagination: Towards a Theory of Kataphatic Practice’,<sup>7</sup> Egil Asprem seeks to explain the emergence of a particular type of subjective experiences, namely astral travel in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. He does so by drawing on recent neurocognitive theories of predictive coding that envisions the brain as a hierarchical prediction machine.<sup>8</sup> In his carefully argued article, Asprem outlines how predictive coding theory can help solve the basic problem of the “felt” reality of certain extraordinary experiences. He argues that the orchestration of behavior into specific sequences, combined with individuals’ immersion in a material environment suffused with a structured range of symbolic artifacts and signs, facilitates the formation of particular experiences in adherents – experiences whose content conforms to expectations transmitted within a given communicative community. In contrast to ascription-based accounts<sup>9</sup>, that argue that a more or less amorphous experience is only *subsequently* structured by culturally transmitted expectations – by formatting prior experiences into culturally acceptable formats – predictive coding argues that *experience itself* is always the aggregated result of both prior expectations and sensory information. The neurocognitive principle underlying this assumption is based on conservation of organic energy. Internal models facilitate easy access to predictions (e.g., I have the internal model that “physical object will fall if unsupported”), and sensory input is only processed if it results in an error-signal caused by a discrepancy between the predictive model and incoming information from the senses (e.g., an unsupported object staying aloft). By working in this way, the brain saves cognitive resources as predictive coding facilitates fast and easy interaction with the world based on expectations as long as discrepancies with sensory input are not too salient. Confirmation bias is the name of the game, as sensory input that conforms to expectations demands less cognitive processing and therefore less energy consumption.

The predictive coding approach is, I believe, extremely promising in its ability to account for the relation between socially imposed discipline – i.e. the structuring of individuals’ lives through rituals, reading of texts, and social interaction – all practices that form strong *expectations* about the content of experiences – and the concrete pragmatic situation in which the experience takes place. A potential problem for this approach, however, concerns the relation between faithfully transmitted tradition and cultural innovation. If cultural technologies, such as ritual behavior and symbolic encoding, are able to effectively mold human experience to conform to expectations, and if the reassessment of internal cognitive models based on sensory information demands expenditure of energy, how is novelty introduced into the system? Why doesn’t experience always follow (culturally accepted) expectations? In fact this has been raised as a problem of potential cognitive conservatism involved in the predictive coding account of the human cognitive system.<sup>10</sup> Why would humans ever look for new information and not isolate themselves in highly predictable environments that conform to their predictions (thereby lowering their energy expenditure)? This is dubbed the “dark-room-problem” as it predicts that organisms should seek out and stay in “dark rooms” in order to minimize the energy spent on

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<sup>7</sup> Asprem, ‘Explaining the Esoteric Imagination’.

<sup>8</sup> Clark, ‘Whatever Next’.

<sup>9</sup> E.g., Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*.

<sup>10</sup> Clark, ‘Whatever Next’.

processing error-signals. This is, obviously, a non-adaptive strategy for most organisms. One way to solve this problem is to posit a number of species-specific strategies intrinsic to any particular biological organism, such as play, hunger, curiosity, and thirst. These basic drives install background expectations (such as predicted presence of novelty or food) that motivate the organism to seek out environments that facilitate the lowering of error-signals (actual presence of novelty or food). How this translates into the study of religion and the formation of religious experience remains to be seen. One initial hypothesis would be that a species-specific drive in individuals towards attaining social status (and thereby potential access to resources and mates) in some situations prompts the introduction of novelty rather than conformity to already established cultural models. This might be especially relevant to esoteric and other elitist movements, where imagination, innovation, inspiration, and self-aggrandizement are status markers – a feature that would explain the extreme propensity for schismatic fragmentation characteristic of many esoteric movements.

### **3. CSR and Esoteric Discourse: DeConick's article on the Cognitive Constraints on the Development of Soul Flight Narratives**

At the other end of the experiential-discursive continuum, we find April DeConick's analysis of the construction of soul flight narratives in Mediterranean antiquity, in her article, 'Soul Flights: Cognitive Ratcheting and the Problem of Comparison'.<sup>11</sup> Addressing a fundamentally historical problem of comparison between different accounts of soul flights, DeConick uses cognitive theories to differentiate between universal core properties of the narratives, based on a number of basic image schemata and intuitive assumptions, and the narrative elaborations produced by means of a process of cognitive ratcheting and reflective rumination leading to the great variety of narratives actually observed. DeConick primarily draws her theoretical inspiration from conceptual metaphor theory, and in particular works with the notion of image schemata, i.e. elementary sensory-motor conceptualizations of space mapped onto other domains that thereby supplies basic conceptual scaffolding.<sup>12</sup> This approach enables her to isolate the elementary structural component of the soul flight narrative, a sort of core narrative structure organized around a valorized conception of UP as positive and related to aspects such as virtue, happiness, consciousness, health, control, status, and rationality, in contrast to DOWN as negative and related to sadness, depravity, unconsciousness, sickness, lack of control, low status, and emotionality. This content-poor, basic scaffolding is subsequently enriched through a process DeConick dubs "cognitive ratcheting". Cognitive ratcheting is a concept formation process that adds intuitive conceptual content based upon domain specific inferences as well as deliberate, reflective elaborations leading to the plethora of antique soul flight narratives.

DeConick thus proposes a model that can account for a fundamental question relevant to all historians (of religion): how are new ideas created? What types of creative processes underlie the construction of new meaning and how do we account for the simultaneous presence of novelty and sameness? I find the idea of a gradual conceptual unfolding resulting in higher degrees of reflectivity rather compelling, as well as DeConick's argument that this process, in turn, necessitates an ever-increasing

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<sup>11</sup> DeConick, 'Soul Flights'

<sup>12</sup> Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*; Lakoff & Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.

dependency on material prompts, such as texts and symbols, in order to be remembered and transmitted. Higher complexity makes concepts less cognitively optimal and they therefore become increasingly dependent on material crutches to ensure their transmission – a process that enables historians to track the process of conceptual elaboration in the material culture. I do, however, miss a more direct discussion of the role of literacy in this highly elitist religious environment. What is the importance of the shift into written transmission for the relation between innovation, diffusion, and stable universal core characteristics of the narratives? Anthropologist Jack Goody famously argued for the basic cognitive change effected by the introduction of literacy<sup>13</sup>. More recently, psychologist Merlin Donald has similarly argued that literacy follows the introduction of a whole new stage in culture-mind co-evolutionary development,<sup>14</sup> and this theory, in turn, inspired Robert Bellah's recent book on religious evolution.<sup>15</sup> A more specific question of high relevance to DeConick's study is which importance the minority status of the gnostic groups under scrutiny had for transmission patterns and for the formation of the soul flight narratives themselves? As we see in Markússon's contribution discussed below, elitist minority groups might deliberately boost the abstractness, opaqueness, and perhaps even incomprehensibility of narratives in order to differentiate themselves from the majority.

In line with this, it seems obvious that antique, gnostic soul flight narratives form part of what has been broadly conceived as axial age, utopian, or salvation religions.<sup>16</sup> A hypothesis expanding on DeConick's analysis could be that early soul flight narratives – schematically represented as a *descent* at death into the underworld and, mimicking the trajectory of the sun, a subsequent rebirth on earth – reflect localistic, archaic religions of fertility and their preoccupation with renewal and material prosperity. In contrast, axial age religions introduce a radical cosmological dualism contrasting the material, earthly existence with a transcendent, celestial realm. Both utilize a basic UP-DOWN schema, but earthly existence is transformed from being a positively valorized UP, relative to the shadow underworld existence, into a negatively valorized DOWN relative to a purely spiritual heavenly existence. Such integration of broader discursive structures when explaining the formation of singular narratives points to a question of central importance to many historians of religion: why do some narratives and beliefs survive, whereas others perish, leaving only fragments to be deciphered by modern-day scholars? DeConick points to the degree of abstractness as a constraining factor, as well as the role of ritual in transmission. The more abstract the teachings, the more necessary will explicit tuition be for any wider transmission to take place. This is a very apt example of direct impact of cognitive constraints on social formations, in this case the emergence of institutions of learning. Whether the gnostic groups analyzed by DeConick utilized some of the ritual techniques of imagination described by Aspren is itself an interesting empirical question. In any case, religious groups' ability to create convincing experiential basis for core beliefs might in itself be a constraining factor in the dissemination of religious beliefs. The harder it is to produce experiential correlates of central beliefs for at least core members of the group, the more difficult it becomes to motivate the dissemination of these beliefs, and/or to form stable social

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<sup>13</sup> Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*; idem, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*.

<sup>14</sup> Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind*; idem, *A Mind So Rare*.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

institutions. Finally, the spread of religious ideas and narratives is constrained by their degree of novelty relative to broader discursive structures present within any given social group. DeConick convincingly presents a cognitive model that accounts for the creation of new meaning and imaginative elaborations of narratives. However, the degree to which such novelties are successfully transmitted to the next generation is not solely constrained by pragmatic factors (material encoding, ritual, explicit tuition) or intuitive optimality (easy to remember and salient). Success also depends on their degree of fit with already existing and widely held conceptual models. As such, cultural conceptual systems include a kind of immunological effect that prevents easy access for novel concepts and ideas.<sup>17</sup>

#### **4. CSR and the Influence of Esoteric Discourse on Experience: Markússon's Article on the Attractiveness of Opaque Texts**

At a mid-point in the experiential-discursive continuum, we find Guðmundur Ingi Markússon's article, 'Indices in the Dark: Towards a Cognitive Semiotics of Western Esotericism, Exemplified by Crowley's *Liber AL*'.<sup>18</sup> Where Asprem focuses on the experiential component of a particular ritual practice (astral travel) and DeConick focuses on similarities and differences within a thematically associated corpus of narratives, Markússon directs our attention to a concrete esoteric text, its use within ritual, and its reception by members of a group. Similar to Asprem, Markússon discusses contemporary subject matter, the Thelema tradition, and more narrowly its use of Aleister Crowley's book *Liber AL* as its central sacred text. Markússon thus addresses a question that has not been thoroughly treated by the cognitive science of religion: what is the cognitive role of religious texts?<sup>19</sup> Thelema's interaction with *Liber AL* serves as an extreme case that exemplifies a general feature of western esotericism: the appeal to hidden, occult meaning and the correspondent affection for texts, signs, or actions with an opaque or downright incomprehensible meaning. *Liber AL* contains a large number of opaque meanings and is notoriously difficult to interpret. Markússon asks why anyone bothers reading this and similar texts, let alone why they are accepted as sacred texts and used as ritual objects. What is in it for the reader if information is opaque, the text is incoherent, and its discursive unfolding is unstructured? A usual approach in the cognitive sciences when trying to explain the effect of deviations from standard or canonical processing is to model how *ordinary* processing takes place. Accordingly, Markússon investigates the role of semantic opaqueness by outlining the contrast case of the relative semantic transparency found in more mundane texts. Based on studies in cognitive linguistics by Langacker and by Sperber and Wilson, Markússon argues that textual information is defined by a set of expectations as to its internal discursive coherence; its ability to function as a whole; as well as its general communicative relevance – all expectations violated in *Liber AL*.

Markússon points to the authority of the source as a first step in explaining the acceptance of opaque religious texts by a group of followers. The importance of charismatic authority on reception of information should not be underestimated, as it

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<sup>17</sup> Sørensen, 'Religion, Evolution and an Immunology of Cultural Systems'; *ibid*, 'Past Minds'.

<sup>18</sup> Markússon, 'Indices in the Dark'.

<sup>19</sup> A notable exception is Malley, *How the Bible Works*. The reason for this neglect is likely (a) that the cognitive science of religion has been dominated by psychologists and anthropologists, none of whom place much emphasis on texts; and (b) that the field is reacting against the "theologizing tendency" of earlier approaches to religion that sought for a coherent world-view based solely on the systematic study of textual corpora; cf. Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas*.

is well established in the study of religion in general and has been experimentally substantiated in recent fMRI studies performed by Uffe Schjødt and colleagues.<sup>20</sup> Contextual knowledge strongly influences our expectations as we attach a meta-representational “tag” to information received, determining its initial relevance and epistemic value – a process highly dependent on the perceived credibility of the source, behavior accompanying the information as well as general background knowledge.<sup>21</sup> Later in the article Markússon raises the, I believe, highly relevant prospect of studying this phenomena in light of theories of predictive coding. Expectations always guide interpretation and introducing strong priors concerning the sacred origin of the text induces a search for meaning – in the case of esoteric texts a search for an occult truth hidden beneath a more or less opaque surface level. Prior expectations initialize an “occult hermeneutic” process according to which surface phenomena point to a hidden layer of reality that is only accessible with the right interpretational “key”. This key is subsequently verified by the interpretations that reveal the secret and real meanings hiding beneath the surface phenomena. Thus a self-reinforcing and non-falsifiable hermeneutic circle is created.<sup>22</sup>

As is generally the case with sacred texts, the relevance and importance of *Liber AL* is hardly doubted by Thelemites, and this raises the next question: what are the cognitive effects of combining perceived importance and relevance, on the one hand and opacity and obscurity on the other? Based on theories from semiotics and cognitive linguistics, Markússon argues that the opacity of the text results in an unsuccessful semiotic process in which symbolic reference, understood as the communication of meaning through conventional linguistic signs, breaks down and is replaced by an *indexical* understanding of textual elements as “pointing” to something both hidden and important. Markússon dubs this the “relevant index effect”. Moreover this semiotic reduction, reducing meaning to an indexical sign pointing to an unrevealed layer of truth, produces an emotional response in the receiver. Thus opacity, if not downright rejected as meaningless by the cognizing agent, is likely to lead to affective responses, an effect that is supported by meta-textual descriptions of the text as “dangerous” and full of secret and powerful revelations.

Two things spring to mind as aspects that can be further developed. First, Markússon briefly mentions the concept of “genre” as a meta-representational mark that activates a number of expectations. Genre is highly relevant both as a way in which adherents specify a number of expectations to a particular text and as a *terminus technicus* for a comparative study of religion interested in more general characteristics of “sacred texts”. Besides claims to being revelations, a number of formal characteristics might serve as common traits for sacred texts, such as some degree of opaqueness and exoticism. *Liber AL* and other esoteric books are perhaps extreme cases of a tendency towards textual opacity found in *all* sacred texts. Thus semantic under-determination is likely to be a central feature of successful sacred texts as it ensures the possibility of context dependent reinterpretation. Markússon touches upon this in his discussion concerning the relation between opaqueness and exegesis, but I believe this can be investigated further. Based on Rappaport, Markússon argues that opacity itself calls for interpretation, but we must expand our line of inquiry into the social-psychological effects of the relation between opacity and interpretation. Opaque texts construct a field of competition between different adherents who can all lay claims to authority based on exactly *their* interpretation.

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<sup>20</sup> Schjødt et al., ‘The Power of Charisma’.

<sup>21</sup> Sperber (ed.), *Metarepresentations*.

<sup>22</sup> Sørensen, ‘Theosophy’.

Reading and interpreting an opaque text is an investment of time and resources, in short, it is a costly signal.<sup>23</sup> Therefore these activities express both commitment to the group and function as claims to status within the group, just as when the liberal arts student reads Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (to use Markússon's example). She does so, not only because this text is claimed to be both difficult and important, but also because this difficult activity sends a signal of commitment to, and places a bid for status within, an academic tribe. Thus, not only do we need to understand the mechanisms underlying peoples' acceptance of some and not other exegeses; we further need to understand the role of textual opacity in movement dynamics more broadly conceived.

Second, in a note Markússon briefly mentions the similarity between his account of textual opacity and recent theories of rituals that focus on causally opaque actions<sup>24</sup>. I believe this should be more fully investigated. Whereas Markússon's article has the merit of adding a semio-cognitive explanation to previous approaches that emphasized how semantic opacity provokes an interpretative strategy in order to cognitively integrate such "relevant mysteries",<sup>25</sup> few studies have been dedicated to the cognitive effects of the performative aspects of sacred texts. From Markússon's description it seems evident that the *Liber AL* not only takes part in the Gnostic Mass but that it is, in itself, a ritualized object. In ethology, the process of ritualization entails that behavioral sequences are removed from their functional domain in order to serve as communicative signs – the very non-functionality provoking a cognitive process of trying to make sense of the action.<sup>26</sup> Aggressive behavior may function as communication if no enemy is present, and eating a sanctified wafer certainly does not satisfy hunger and can therefore function as an act of communication. In a similar, but rather paradoxical vein, an object whose primary function is to communicate by means of symbolic reference (e.g., a book) can be ritualized through negating its canonical functionality – a process that allows it to communicate by other, more direct and perhaps cognitively simpler means. This is, I believe, the process described by Markússon's concept of a "relevant index effect". However, emphasizing its essentially ritualized nature points to a feature not discussed: the object thereby attains ritual efficacy, and thus its potential to change the world is conceived as much more potent than had it merely communicated by means of symbolic reference. This assumption is supported by Crowley's sinister warning only to read the text once and destroy it thereafter; by the Thelemite Lon Milo DuQuette's burning desire to get hold of another copy following his destruction of the first one; as well as by the potential of the text (book) to function as a ritual object in the Gnostic Mass. In short, the text, and potentially the book as a material object, achieves magical efficacy: its signs are no longer pragmatically defined and evaluated based on their ability to convey meaning by means of conventional symbolic reference. Rather, they are understood as direct expressions of a *causal* relation to some undisclosed aspect of a hidden reality, as smoke is causally related to (as yet unseen) fire, or an angry face is a causal expression of (otherwise hidden) anger. Therefore, nothing should be altered in the

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<sup>23</sup> Sosis and Alcorta, 'Signaling, Solidarity, and the Sacred'.

<sup>24</sup> Markússon refers to Sørensen, *A Cognitive Theory of Magic*. Examples of more recent work in this area include Sørensen, 'Acts that Work', Lienard and Boyer, 'Whence Collective Ritual?'; Kapitány and Nielsen, 'The Ritual Stance and the Precaution System'; Legare and Watson-Jones, 'A Cognitive Psychological Account of Reasoning about Ritual Efficacy'.

<sup>25</sup> Sperber, *Explaining Culture*.

<sup>26</sup> Huxley, 'Introduction'; Burkert, 'The Creation of the Sacred'; Sørensen, 'Ritual as Action and Symbolic Expression'.

text – not even the style of a letter, as such alterations would have unknown causal consequences – and the process of reading is itself understood as an action with potentially lethal consequences. The similarities to the formalism and causal opaqueness of ritualized behavior are unmistakable.

### **5. Conclusion: Perspectives for CSR-inspired Research on Western Esotericism**

What then are the potential mutual benefits for studies of western esotericism and the cognitive science of religion? At some level the question is trivial. The relation between the two is like the relation between any empirically defined specified field of inquiry and more general explanatory studies. The natural historian focused on investigating the life cycle of a particular beetle is both informed by and informs the evolutionary biologist that focuses on eliciting general processes of Darwinian evolution. In the same way, the linguist studying a particular language is informed by and informs the linguist studying the human language faculty in *toto*. In this sense the relation between cognitive science of religion and studies of western esotericism is similar to the relation between any generalized and specialized field of inquiry.<sup>27</sup> However, as with any particular area, western esotericism has its peculiarities that might prove particularly well suited to inform certain aspects of general theories. One method to elicit underlying cognitive processes consists in picking out highly salient or even pathological cases in order to isolate and precisely model distinct phenomena. For instance, studies of autism have proven extremely helpful in understanding the general composition of theory of mind mechanisms and social cognition. In a similar manner esotericism presents both comparative religion and cognitive science of religion with a number of extreme cases that might help us isolate and understand more general mechanisms found in all religions as well as the underlying cognitive mechanisms. If we disregard New Age as designating a field of widely diffused ideas and practices, most esoteric groups are intrinsically elitist; they work with material that is very difficult to comprehend even for skilled adherents; and they uphold explicit or implicit social hierarchies allegedly based on degree of access to secret knowledge. This field is ripe for studies inspired by recent developments in social cognition, evolutionary psychology, and behavioral ecology. What are the processes activated when difficult to acquire symbolic knowledge becomes a status marker? What is the role of experience (real or claimed) in this process? How does experience undergird the individual stabilization and wider diffusion of socially transmitted beliefs? And how do such beliefs influence the relation to majority society?

Another important line of inquiry raised by the present studies concerns the role of imagination and innovation. This topic is, of course, of great relevance for cognitive science of religion as well as for cognitive science in general. Modeling the processes underlying human imagination is a huge endeavor and all contributions should be welcomed. Again western esotericism has some peculiarities that make it particularly suited as subject matter. As mentioned above, esoteric groups seem strongly susceptible to schisms. Groups splinter on a regular basis. In this process, claims to personal, charismatic authority seems to be more important than institutional authority and such personalized claims to authority are often exactly based on alleged visions, revelations, and experiences. At the same time, due to its elitism, belonging to a theoretical culture that expresses itself in writing is one characteristic of esotericism. Thus tracking and interrelating the textual sources gives us a unique possibility to gain insight into the transformation of ideas over time, and thus to the imaginative and

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<sup>27</sup> Jensen, *The Study of Religion in a New Key*.

elaborative processes underlying their formation. This, in turn, enables us to raise a number of questions such as: What is the relation between ideas already present, new formations, and the cognitive optimality principles claimed in the standard model? How innovative can new ideas be while succeeding in having a wider cultural impact? Do we find core properties and stable metaphors that ensure reliable transmission? And how are transmission rates and degrees of cognitive optimality related to the media of expression?

We need, of course, to be careful not to assume that texts are direct expressions of what is in peoples' minds. Texts conform to a number of expectations and constraints such as genre, potential audience, censorship, and material media. However, accepting such exteriority of texts enables us to treat these as objects that inform experience and redirect reflective cognitive styles in a number of areas – from conceptions of autobiographical events and ritual experiences, to the role of randomization and correspondence systems in divination. Here experimental and historical approaches might enlighten each other. Descriptions of methods used to produce particular experiences elicited by historians might inspire experimentalists in their design.<sup>28</sup> In turn, findings of experimentalists on such things as the experiential impact, recall, and social effects of certain practices might help historians better situate practices within a wider context, including psychology, and potentially elicit why certain practices and not others have proven successful over time.

Some of the questions raised above have already been addressed in the articles in this special issue of *Aries*. And many others could be raised. But hopefully this is only the beginning as new generations of scholars less concerned with traditional disciplinary borders tackle their subject matter with all theoretical and methodological tools available. The fruitfulness of applying cognitive theories and methods to the study of western esotericism will, of course, ultimately depends on its ability to produce relevant and interesting results.

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<sup>28</sup> See Andersen, Schjoedt, Nielbo and Sørensen, 'Mystical Experience in the Lab' for a recent example of utilizing a sham version of Michael Persinger's God helmet in order to induce mystical experiences in subject.

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