Review

István Czachesz, *Cognitive Science & the New Testament: A New Approach to Early Christian Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 288 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19877-986-5. £65.00 hbk.

Reviewed by: Anders Klostergaard Petersen, Aarhus University, Denmark
Email: akp@cas.au.dk

István Czachesz has been one of the pioneers in applying cognitive science to the study of the formation of Christ religion. To date, his new book is his most comprehensive attempt to demonstrate the value of cognitive science for the study of New Testament and related texts of early Christ religion. The book, entitled *Cognitive Science & the New Testament*, complements the recent monograph by Risto Uro, a long-time colleague and collaborator of Czachesz (Uro 2016). Whereas Uro focuses on the interpretation of early Christian ritual by means of a cognitive science approach, Czachesz casts his net wider. His emphasis lies on introducing cognitive science and its potential in analysing early Christ religion and its texts to the wider guild of New Testament scholars. Although several chapters are partly updated versions of previously published articles by the author, the scope and breadth of the discussion legitimizes the present publication. Apart from a short introduction, the book comprises ten chapters, a general index and an index of modern authors.

As Czachesz rightly points out, the cognitive science of religion (CSR henceforth) is a relatively new field of only 25 years (cf. Martin and Wiebe 2017). Yet, in less than three decades, CSR has changed the discipline of the study of religion considerably, so that no one in the field and related disciplines today can ignore the insights and wider implications stemming from the natural sciences in general and cognitive science in particular. Painting with a wide brush, Czachesz in Chapter 1 depicts the emergence of the cognitive science of religion and its entry into New Testament studies. Chapter 2 gives a short introduction to evolutionary theory mostly based on Eva Jablonka's and Marion Lamb's excellent but now 12-year-old book, *Evolution in Four Dimensions* (Jablonka and Lamb 2005). Much of the most recent literature in the field, however, is not taken into consideration. Chapter 3 proceeds to give an overview of

the brain. This introduction paves the way for the discussion in the subsequent chapters on neuroscientific aspects of memory and transmission (Chapter 4), religious experience (Chapter 7), and morality (Chapter 8). Squeezed in between these chapters are discussions of ritual (Chapter 5) and magic and miracles (Chapter 6). The two last chapters of the book respectively dwell on social networks and computer models in which Czachesz examines the interrelation between cognitive and social factors in the spread of early Christ religion (Chapter 9), and presents his over-all hermeneutical reflections on the impact and significance of the cognitive approach (Chapter 10).

To what extent does the book accomplish its goal of introducing a CSR approach to the wider strands of scholars working on early Christian literature? Does it succeed in whetting the appetite for cognitive science? Obviously, we must wait to see, but Czachesz does a good a job in providing the partly technical discussion in several of the chapters with illustrative examples from the New Testament and related texts. Some are likely to find his examples slightly superficial by the lack of in-depth analysis, but given that his emphasis is to point out the potential of cognitive science for the study of religion in general, and that of formative Christ religion in particular, they serve a fine job as suggestions for further exploration.

There are excellent ideas and reflections throughout the book, but I have a more serious query concerning the collocation of different cognitive approaches and theories that are not evidently compatible with each other. In Chapter Eight, for instance, Czachesz introduces the reader to the special modularity theory of Leda Cosmides and John Tooby (1992), but without mentioning that recent research in the field has become increasingly sceptical about the idea of special brain modules responsible for such distinct tasks (p. 174). In introducing in the same chapter the possible effects of natural selection also at the collective rather than at the individual level, Czachesz fails to disclose the problems involved in the idea of group selection, which have made many scholars in relevant fields reticent to accept the concept.

This somewhat idiosyncratic presentation of the field also weakens the argument in Chapter 7 on religious experience in which Czachesz in reference to K. R. Livingston's now old article "Religious Practice, Brain, and Belief" (2005) develops "the lobes theory of religious experience" (p. 149). Although Czachesz' version of the theory is also informed by other studies from approximately the same period (studies that tone down Livingston's emphasis not only on a connection between types of experiences and brain areas but also identification between frontal lobe experience and nontheistic religion), Czachesz upholds the lobe theory. In fact, without providing

any clear-cut definition, let alone a lucid theory, he moves on to analyse glossolalia in the “Corinthian Church” reconstructed on the basis of 1 Cor. in light of the lobes theory (pp. 151–55). This is in my view a highly dubious endeavour based on somewhat weak presuppositions. I am also highly sceptical about the subsequent analysis of fundamentally rhetorically instantiated and profoundly narratively orchestrated depictions of tours to heaven (the *Ascensio Isaiae*) in light of neuroscientific models as presented by Czachesz (pp. 155–65; see also the special issue “Religious Experience in Mediterranean Antiquity” edited by Czachesz himself, in *Journal of Cognitive Historiography* 2[2] 2015). In light of current brain research, but not necessarily cognitive science, I think that the brain is far more complex and, at the present stage of research in an expanding, but still incipient, field of science, considerably more enigmatic than in Czachesz’ rendering. I also think that the connections he assumes from textual rendering to underlying experiential levels are far too simple.

In my view, Czachesz’ aspirations, admirable as they may be, are also the weakness of the book. In his overall presentation of the cognitive science of religion approach, he wishes to do more than is warranted. The book would have been stronger had it been limited to fewer areas and had it given a more balanced presentation of the *status quaestionis* in the respective fields discussed. That would also have allowed Czachesz to pursue the questions in more depth with respect to showing their great relevance for the study of early Christ religion and its text production.

These critical comments, however, do not reduce the value of the book. Czachesz succeeds in proving what he strives to show throughout the book, namely that a cognitive science approach is valuable for scholars of early Christ religion inasmuch as it provides new solutions to old problems and prompts scholarship to pose new questions about the textual and material evidence (p. v). I would push the argument even further by claiming that at least some familiarity with the cognitive science of religion and related theoretical and methodological approaches are indispensable to scholars of religion. A great many of the problems we have struggled with for decades, if not centuries, have now come within our reach of being solved. Czachesz’ book is a fine introduction to what can be learned and gained from cognitive science in general, and the cognitive science of religion in particular (especially as it regards the study of early Christ religion), and it also provides a blueprint as to how such knowledge can be used in textual and wider studies relating to the beginnings of any religion.

References

- Cosmides, L., and J. Tooby. 1992. "The Psychological Foundations of Culture". In *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*, ed. J. Barkow, L. Cosmides and J. Tooby. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jablonka, E., and M. J. Lamb. 2005. *Evolution in Four Dimensions: Genetic, Epigenetic, Behavioral, and Symbolic Variation in the History of Life*. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press.
- Livingston, K. R. 2005. "Religious Practice, Brain, and Belief". *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 5(1): 75–117. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1568537054068633>
- Martin, L. H., and D. Wiebe, eds. 2017. *Religion Explained? The Cognitive Science of Religion after Twenty-Five Years*. London and New York: Bloomsbury.
- Uro, R. 2016. *Ritual and Christian Beginnings; A Socio-Cognitive Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.