Special Issue on the Experimental Research of Religion

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During the last decade, the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) has begun to come of age. All academic fields start with the work of a few pioneers. In its infancy, CSR could be summed up in the work of a handful of individual scholars from the humanities who borrowed scientific theories to interpret existing data, typically without much interaction with those working in other disciplines (Boyer 1992, 1994; Guthrie 1980, 1993; Lawson and McCauley 1990; Whitehouse 1992, 1995). The establishment in 2004 of the first CSR centre, the Institute of Cognition and Culture in Belfast, marked the beginning of a transition to the next version of CSR (“CSR 2.0” as Bulbulia calls it in this volume). In this version, younger generations of CSR scholars come from the humanities as well as the sciences and receive interdisciplinary training, thoroughly incorporating cognitive science into their empirical work already in the design phase, and publishing their results in top journals across various disciplines.

One of the most noticeable changes that CSR 2.0 has brought is an increased emphasis (although by no means exclusive) on experimentation. As one of the pioneers of the field used to tell me when I was his student, “theories are cheap”. And indeed they are, as theories are only as good as the evidence that support them. There are, of course, many types of evidence, and each type may be more appropriate for answering specific kinds of questions. But there should be no doubt that the experimental method is second to none in terms of explanatory power. Modern CSR scholars are certainly not all experimentalists, nor are those who conduct experiments *only* experimentalists. Most of them are primarily engaged in ethnographic, textual, archaeological, correlational, or other qualitative and quantitative forms of work, which provide them with an empirical area of study and expertise. Experimentation is thus not the goal but the means of learning more about their object of study.

Combining traditional methods with experimental skills is of course not easy work. In a time of more and more specialisation, it is increasingly difficult to truly master more than one research traditions. For this reason, CSR 2.0 has also brought more collaborative forms of conducting and consequently publishing research, which in turn has made new institutional settings possible — and necessary. In 2011, the Laboratory for the Experimental Research of Religion (LEVYNA) in Brno became the first research and educational structure in the world exclusively dedicated to experimental approaches to the study of religion.

To celebrate, discuss, and critically assess what Sørensen and Nielbo in this issue call the “experimental turn” in the cognitive science of religion, in October 2012 LEVYNA hosted a conference with the title *Homo Experimentalis: Experimental Approaches in the Study of Religion*. This special issue presents a peer-reviewed selection of the papers presented at that conference.

The opening paper of the issue by Joseph Bulbulia discusses the virtues of “model-based, hypothesis-driven research,” and stresses the mutually beneficial ways in which traditional humanists and CSR experimentalists can—and should—productively interact. After presenting various examples of state-of-the-art CSR research coming from his own work and that of his colleagues, Bulbulia, like a true experimentalist, offers three specific, falsifiable predictions about the near future of the field. First, he expects that over the next few years experimental paradigms will become increasingly common in the discipline of religious studies, although he wisely cautions that experiments will not be able to answer every question about religion. Second, he expects that the proportion of inter-disciplinary collaborations that cut across the sciences and the humanities will continue to grow in CSR. And third, he expects that historians of religion will more frequently appeal to biological models and methods (like phylogenetics) to better inform our knowledge of the past, aided by existing and forthcoming technological and methodological advances. In closing, Bulbulia offers some wise advice to young CSR scholars.

Having thus set the tone, the issue presents four more papers that are indicative of the breadth and versatility of the work conducted in CSR. Justin Lane makes an argument for the use of computer modelling, an alternative to experimentation, in studying complex social phenomena such as religious ones; Porubanova et al. present evidence from a laboratory experiment on memory for minimally counterintuitive concepts; Jonathan Jong reviews experimental and correlational evidence on the role of death anxiety in religious belief; and Sørensen and Nielbo present critical musings on the place and role of experimental research in the cognitive science of religion. Finally, in keeping with the tradition we started in our first issue, we include a variety of book reviews relevant to CSR scholars.

The articles included in this issue are only a small selection of those presented at the *Homo Experimentalis* conference, which was also followed by a summit where the leaders of the biggest CSR centres worldwide presented their views on the present and future of the experimental research of religion. Based on the success of the conference and the lively and lengthy discussion that followed, and assessing the overall state of the art in the field, I chime in with Bulbulia's prediction that experimental studies will be at the forefront of the cognitive science of religion both in the short and in the long term.

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