Rozhovor s profesorem Arminem W. Geertzem

Redakce Sacra


Sacra

First question is going to be very general. When you look at Denmark and its educational system, what is the possessin of the scientific study of religion on the high school level? And a little subquestion. What kind of perspectives are there on the job market for your graduates?

Armin W. Geertz

The Danish system, fortunately for us, is that religion is taught in the secondary school, in gymnasium, and it is obligatory. It used to be quite popular. It was in the third year, we have a three-year gymnasium, when the students are a little bit older and thinking about things. Then the new conservative government gained power, prioritized the natural sciences and sadly moved the natural sciences up to the third year and the religion to the second year. But anyway, they have to be taught and it has to be non-confessional. They do have a requirement that the children should be taught how the religion is both from inside and from outside. They do not require that you have to be a practising member in order to teach it. And in fact, people would be upset if it turned out that way. It used to be the people

1 Rozhovoru byli přítomni Radek Kundt a Eva Klocová. Přepisu se ujali Jitka Klesnilevá, Jan Blažek a Kristýna Brožková.
with theological education who did it but that changed. I think it was in seventies, so that people with the humanistic education from the university become teachers. And there are very clear rules about how the subjects are divided, because they have Christianity as an important part but they also have recently Islam and religions in India as obligatory. For pure political reasons that is something that the Ministry of Education has introduced when the conservative government took over. Before that, it was only in general how things were divided, but that is very specific now. One result was that my particular area – indigenous religions (religions of the Americas, Africa, Oceania, Australia, Siberia etc.) became a choice. Teachers could choose it if they want them. Earlier, they had to have some course. Particularly people in Denmark with its colonial history with the Greenland it was quite popular subject to teach the Greenlandic religions as well. So I have for example written four books for the gymnasium teaching on different areas, Hopi Indians, Africa and other areas. So this means that at the university level all of our graduate students, the ones who get Masters' but also have a minor degree, have to have two subjects if they want to teach in gymnasium, and it has to be a gymnasium subject otherwise they can not get an access to the job market. Most of our students are either from the other human sciences like History or Danish, English, French, German and so on, or they take those courses as their minor if they are from us. At one point, the study of religion was one of the most popular secondary subjects at our university. But this changed. We think it was because the language requirement for the minor was too easy. We allowed people to either choose Latin or to choose old Nordic. So we have a lot of students doing old Norse or doing Latin, but few were doing Greek and one or two doing Sanskrit, because more difficult the language, the fewer they were. So we reintroduced as obligatory that they have to learn Greek so that they could read New Testament. And that immediately cut the rate. In terms of figures we have always kept certain amount of our own students. Every year we have fifty plus five. That has been raised to sixty now. And sometimes we had up to seventy or eighty people who chose our subject as minor. We were a little worried because this meant a lot of teachers in religion in gymnasium, who did not have religion as major subject, so they did not know enough about it. It is only year and a half, that is what you get for your minor subject. And so, they did have a period where you could update your knowledge. You could come back at the university and update. It was decided that it should be in the minor subject – whatever subjects you had, it had to be the minor subject. So we had a lot of people coming back and getting updates on their knowledge. So this is our main job market for our students, for our graduates. Then there is a research line, where you can continue, after you have done your MA. You can continue and do the Ph.D. – that is a three-year thing. That is people who either want to get a job at university or in some research institution or because they just want to do it and then they find a job in, I do not know, IT or something, or helping in the government having to do with foreign cultures and things like that.

They have changed the system now to one derived from natural sciences model, which we call four plus four. You do not have to do your Masters'. You can take some exams and write a long paper, but not as long as Masters' dissertation, and if you are judged qualified then you can go in to the Ph.D., which is four years. The first two years of the four years are like ending your preliminary work and then the
last two years are the actual Ph.D. with full pay for Ph.D., whereas the first two years they are paid double what the student gets. So the government saves money and it helps the students to finish earlier – that was the whole reason to get them finish earlier.

Sacra

Is this subject Religion part of some kind of “Social sciences” subject on gymnasium? Because in our system Religion is not obligatory per se, you can mention it within the subject which is called “Social sciences” where you have economics, law and philosophy. And we are still trying to have religion as an obligatory subject on the gymnasiums, because otherwise we are not really giving our students enough perspectives on the job market.

Armin W. Geertz

Ours is a separate subject. They do have social sciences – they call it “contemporary studies” or “current affairs”, I think. There would be people from anthropology or sociology who would be teaching that. But there had been periods when they were talking about putting it together either with philosophy or with antiquities. And I mean there are of course natural lines of connection between the two subjects but we fought against that a lot because it would reduce our employment possibilities.

Sacra

The second question is more to our field. How do you see the Scientific Study of Religion as a system? And what kind of position should a Cognitive Science of Religion have within this system? How do you see the Religious Studies or Scientific Studies itself as a system?

Armin W. Geertz

It is my opinion that the Scientific Study of Religion is multidisciplinary and that we do not have any particular method. I suppose one could say that what defines our field is our interest in religion. So it is the subject. Of course the problem is how do you define your subject. There is nobody who agree on anything. Just recently, last Friday, there was a PhD. opposition where a student, otherwise brilliant person, she wrote that “Religion is what scholars of religion agree on.”. My reply was: “Well, since they do not agree on anything, what is it you are talking about?”

I have written about it in a couple of different journals. A couple of Italians were mad because I criticized Ugo Bianchi, the great-grandfather of Italian History of Religions. You can get people to agree on a particular definition, but I think, what I have been trying to do is to get people to be aware of the fact that they have intuitive assumptions about humans, religion, supernatural and about symbols and that they should become aware of it. They should try to make their assumptions explicit and work them into their definitions so that the rest of us know what they are talking about. Then when is everything said out we can disagree, of course, on their basic approach. But especially a lot of historians of religion avoid the subject, they keep pushing it off talking about “family likeness” and “prototype theory” but for me it is just a bad excuse to pushing things away. Of course, it is a problem, defining precisely what religion is about. Anyway, I try to approach both colleagues, especially colleagues – I think that senior colleagues should have thought these things through and should take the problem head on, and encourage students to do the same – not necessarily pushing a particular
definition through as the only definition but encouraging people to reflect, to be reflective, to be theoretical. In that particular aspect, I am very much supporter of Donald Wiebe and the other guys, McCutcheon and all those guys who started the North American Association for the Study of Religions and their theoretical approach, one can call it an “analytical approach”, at least in States it probably started with Jonathan Z. Smith when he took over in Chicago and we started getting theoretically sophisticated studies on religion.

Anyway, I see the Study of Religion as a kind of an umbrella driven by its subject and employing whatever disciplines or theories or methods that are useful and solve the problems that one is concerned with. And so the Cognitive Science of Religion is welcomed addition methodologically and theoretically not only as a part of the toolbox of the Study of Religion but also because it gives us opportunities to maybe rethink our subject or our science, and open up to other sciences – especially to the natural sciences which we have been afraid of and very critical of, and suddenly we discovered that the people in the natural sciences and medicines have been working on the same things as we have been working on for years and are today discovering the things that we have known for decades and wonder what is going on – why they have not heard about it from people like us? It is because we have not been talking to them. We have been busy doing our own thing. I think it is really a good opportunity, the thing we are all trying to do in Aarhus, to have a real cooperation with people in neurology, biology, pain research, research on placebo and all that stuff from the evolutionary biology. I mean they are just sitting there and waiting for people like us to come and to start asking them difficult questions. They have never talked to humanists, they have only talked to themselves. So it is a good way to break down barriers. Ultimately, it brings us back to kind of a one science ideal where there can be many levels of analysis not necessarily related to each other but it is all about life one way or another and if it is about humans, then I think we should look at everything about humans if we want to understand them. We can not just keep in to the clouds and analyze virtual worlds. We also need to analyze what people do and how they make these virtual worlds – where that comes from, where do humans have come from, how does the body work, what kind of chemistry is going on when you are doing rituals and all that stuff. We need it – otherwise we are only a half a science.

Sacra

Because many of our readers would not able to attend the conference, would you be so kind to explain what do you see being the benefits and loose ends of the CSR?

Armin W. Geertz

I think that one of the probably major advantages of the Cognitive Science of Religion is that it brings psychology back into the picture, and it brings psychology back in a special way. One of the problems with psychology, I mean psychology from eastern Europe is different than some of the psychology that has been done in America, Britain and even Scandinavia – this is the kind which might be called “psychologised spirituality”, where there is actually a spiritual agenda in a lot of what is called the psychology of religion. And, I think, that it is one of the reasons why it has not had a major impact in the study of religion. Less so in Europe, but I think it has a little larger impact in USA, because William James is the big guy and all, and everybody is a mystic. And unfortunately, some of the empirical
psychologists are doing some really bad science in making people think that like seventy percent of the American population are mystics.

To get back to my point. We need a psychological science that studies religion and is not interested in doing religion or reproducing religion, that does not necessarily have religious agenda whether person who is actually doing it is a believer or not – it is up to them and we are not talking about that, we are talking about a discipline. The CSR are asking other kinds of questions than which you normally find in psychology of religion. What people usually find interesting in psychology of religion is stuff like religious experience and that is usually considered being something special – and that is what takes us back into spirituality stuff – relationship between religion and health for example. There is a special journal about it and it is full of this kind of things. Most of it is a really bad science.

I was particularly interested in what they call “intercessory prayer” where they made some really crazy studies where people who have heart disease and were going to the hospital, their part of the experiment was that their names were sent to different religious organizations and people pray for them. And then they want to see if these people praying for them help them to get through it better. It turns out that either there is no result or recent one that was quite funny was by guy named Herbert Benson who was well known medical doctor, but who has a religious agenda – he clearly admits it on his website and he started a spiritual institute. But he did a really good scientific study where there were four different groups and one of the groups was told that people are praying for them. There was no positive results at all. And the group that heard and was told that somebody was praying for them, they had worse results because evidently they were stressed by the fact that people are praying for them. So that kind of stuff is not very interesting and I think it is the a waste of resources.

So, the Cognitive Sciences of Religion is not interested in that kind of stuff. The CSR is interested in mental processes, representations, memory and how in the world the people pass on from generation to generation their religious ideas especially in oral societies. Or questions like how do the religions ever happen? How do they rise in the history of species? And are there particular ideas that are more natural to people based on their psychology? In other words: are religious ideas natural? Those kinds of questions were not being asked by psychology nor by anybody else. And this, what I think, is the unique contribution by the CSR. The only problem is that all the pioneers of the CSR for heuristic reasons, I would imagine, reduced the influence of culture and social relations and so forth, and are more interested in what they claim to be intuitive constrains or ideas or assumptions. If they can identify those, then they feel they are identifying universal aspects of human life and they think that it helps to explain all variation that one can witness in history of religions. This variation can not explain itself, that is probably their main methodological statement. And when you can identify mechanisms or processes in human cognition that are found everywhere then this has an explanatory value and therefore they talk about that they are able to explain religion, while everybody else is just interpreting religion, which of course is completely naive position from philosophy of science point of view, but it is difficult arguing with these guys – and they are all guys, by the way, there are very few women and this might be why there are so few women in the CSR.
Many of my feminist colleagues also ask me: “Why do you think there are not many women in the CSR?” I do not have any answer, but I assume that it is because of an old fashioned, empiristic, positivistic attitude that is behind all this.

Now I do not think we need to end there. In fact I think we need an alternative. One of my main arguments is that homo sapiens species has never been without culture. So any attempt to deviate or make distinct cognition and culture must somehow be...I do not know, It can never be for sure and you will never know how much culture is influencing the cognitive processes and knowing that the brain has actually been developed to fit into the cultural framework raises some important problems about these so called constraints. But I mean keep on working we are all still in the beginning. Even though the CSR is officially dated from 1990, it goes further, I think, but it's only been going for twenty years and now techniques are becoming more sophisticated.

The other reason – the one was the evolutionary reason why I think we need to pay careful attention to culture as a causal character on cognition –, the other fact is that our colleagues in the neuroscience are discovering the same things and they are coming from the brain side. So, they are interested in neural correlates of psychological and mental processes and they are finding out that the social relations and culture actually have a physical affect on brain. Neurothy, for example, has demonstrated a physical affect on brain. That's why cognitive therapy or neurothy work.

Sacra

Do you mean that you can actually map some sort of changes on the human brain of who went through the neurothy as a difference from persons who didn’t?

Armin W. Geertz

I am basing this on Daniel Siegel who is neurologist and developmental psychologist and therapist, and has written a couple of books by now. The one, the most important one is his first book called “The Integrated Mind”. What is happening when the child is born is that there is a close relationship between mother and the child and, of course, of father and siblings and so far. The child's brain is developing – of course, if it would be fully developed at birth, mother would not be able to give the birth to the child –, and the ride side is much more developed than the left side. The left side develops when they start to learn language. So the first three years are so that all important, communication should go through the right-side kind of activities like feelings. And he calls the feeling-filled, and he calls the music of the mind, and the things like that where the child resonates with its mother's emotional and mental feeling at the moment. And this is helping – when people always talk to children in the special way, and this is because of the evolutionary factors – how you are supposed to talk to kids – they pick up in that way and they get the words on theirs mental states and their body states and their emotions, and by the time they are 24 months they have a vocabulary of mental states not only for them-selves but also for their family, and not only now but also in the past and in the future. So they are already quite competent social beings by that time. And this whole process of language-brain development and social interaction is all happening together and it's helping the two cams of the bicameral brain to integrate. That's what the book means by “integrated mind”. If the child is either abandoned, or subject to violence or to sexual activity or whatever by adult,
then the child’s integration of the two halves is retired or stopped. And they can actually see the scar tissue. And how we are dealing with this – with children who went through traumatic experience – is to talk them, to get them to talk. That’s where narrative can join. And it does not have to be a good story, it just has to be narrative which is a causal moving forward of the story. And that evidently, according to Siegel, affects the brain. It affects the circuitry and it affects the relationship of the two halves of the brain.

This is one of the things that we in Aarhus use as our point of departure. First two years of our research unit was preliminary topic on religious narrative in cognition and culture, and to try to explore the ways in which the narrative theory could be related to cognitive theory. And we merely found the neurology sameness in this stuff... Getting back at my point that is there’re neurologists who are telling this sameness, and there’re neurologists who are not necessarily interested in narrative but who can see that the only way to understand to what’s going on in the brain is also to understand what’s going on between brains. So, there is a lot of literature now coming out that they call social neuroscience, and a new wave (I’ll be showing some of these books tomorrow) of literature on neurology and emotions and body, and bring all this together, basically because of Damasio. Damasio was also behind the social neuroscience boom. He’s seen all the major handbooks on social neuroscience and in his courses and arguing that emotions are implicit, even though whatever we do – even the highest rational procedure... And it’s this kind of things. I think, that is giving us really strong arguments for combining culture, cognition, body, and brain. (And that’s actually the topic of my talk tomorrow. Even the title is something like that – “Too Much Mind and Not Enough Brain, Body and Culture”.)

What I was looking for was that mother’s state of mind, or state of emotions, emotional state is given to the child in many ways – I mean through face, touch, sound, breathing, breast-feeding. And the child gets it all in whole bunch of ways – the multi-sensory taking on of its mother’s states of mind and body. That’s really part of the stuff.

Sacra

We have already come to some points where we mentioned Aarhus and how the RCC started. Could you introduce to our readers more about the RCC project?

Armin W. Geertz

Actually it goes back quite a ways. Jeppe Sending Jensen and I have always been interested in cultural psychology and we were active during the 80’s with study group in Groeningen in the Netherlands. Actually it was a workshop on symbols. They have conferences every year and we showed up at one of the conferences. We are looking at questions of identity in person. Jeppe is specialist in Islam and I am specialist in Hoopie Indians. We use the both of our approaches or subjects to develop some kind of culturally based psychology.

In the 90’s 1990, I was working on my postdoc, on my Habilitation (it’s like the German system), and this was on prophesies about the end of the world by the Hoopie Indians. I was becoming interested in cognition and tried to see if I could work it somehow, but I couldn’t quite make it fit. I was reading Boyer at that time, and Boyer wrote this grate book called “Tradition as Truth and Communication” where he is arguing that if you’re interested in tradition and customs and so on,
you really have to have a strong theory of psychology. I agreed immediately and thoughts have been having a following since then.

We started a research group of senior colleagues and of some of the older students. First, it was on ritual and it became on theory of religion in general. And we called it laboratory on theories of religion. And it wasn't just Jeppe and I, it was a quite a number of our colleagues at the department. And at one point, we found that we were just reading Lawson and McCauley, and then we were reading Boyer, and then we were reading Atran, and then we were reading Whitehouse... So we ones thought “Look, why don't we try to develop a research area on cognition and apply for money at the faculty?” (Our faculty is a faculty of theology, and Faculty of Theology in Aarhus has three subjects. The one is theology which is an education that all pastors of Danish Luther Church have to have, a theological education. Then there is a study of religion which is for gymnasium and research carriers. And there are Semitic languages. At one point we are also moved to our faculty.) And the dean of our faculty was actually from our department. So he immediately understood that this is important, that it's something new, something inspiring – it's inspiring for young people, for students, young scholars, and the best way to deal with it is to have a senior scholars, and they are trying to work through literature and see if there are any interesting avenues that can be followed by Ph.D. students especially, and also master students and bachelor students...

And it ended with us getting us research program from 2002 to 2003 on religious narrative, cognition and culture. And then we found out, after those two years were over, and we held couple of conferences that we should focus more broad – “narrative” was too limited, there was so much else going on, and there hardly was anything on narrative in the CSR. Nobody was interested in narrative, the reader interested in ritual or in ideas, but not in narrative as such – Boyer isn't interested in narrative, he is only interested in ideas... So anyway, then we were awarded a four-year project from 2004 to 2008 which was simply called “Religion, Cognition and Culture”, or “RCC”. And when that ran out, by then we had grown to the staff of like ten people, both fulltime staff (senior staff, as well as postdocs, and guest researchers) and Ph.D. students who were specifically attached to our unit.

And then we were recognized as a research unit under the Department of the Study of Religion. Which means we get a little money, it's not much, but at least we're official and we are there forever unless it becomes a boring subject no one is anymore interested in and then students don't write any papers anymore or anything like that. But until then we'll be going strong and this has given us a good organisational base, so that we can become involved in lot of other activities at the university. And at the moment our great success occured by becoming a member of a research coalition, that's called MINDLab. And MINDLab applied for money from Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, it was 15 million crowns which was given to five best research projects in Denmark. All the universities started a competition and we also applied, we had a budget just under a hundred million. And I think there were like 17 other applicants and the university got all these and then they reduced these 17 to 5. And minister then appointed an evaluation comitee and they appointed a pre reviewed people from other parts of the world. And our project was MINDLab and it consisted of five basic approaches, two of which were in the hard sciences (one in neurology, one in pain), one in psychology (on memory),
one that I was in charge of on cognition and culture and one on language and music, which is also the humanities together with the Royal College of Music.

All the universities sent their applications and then it turned out, that only four projects got top grade and one of them was ours. So we not only got what we applied for, we got more than we applied for, we got 120 million danish crowns. It's a five-year project and we have to split it. There were about over a hundred different people, that were involved in it, from all the sciences. We got a full time position of associate professor in our RCC, and this is Jesper Sørensen, who was employed in another university at the time, and we were able to offer him the job. And when the five years is over the dean has promised that it will continue as a permanent position. And we also got two year post-doc money, so I have been able to hire a couple of people. And the associate professor then had to apply for further money, so that we could get more Ph.D. students. And that helped a lot, giving us a good foothold in our department and a the faculty. We really appreciate it. And the university is really happy, because it got a lot of those extra twenty million.

Sacra

Is the MINDLab completely connected to RCC?

Armin W. Geertz

Yes, RCC is one of the projects and I am in charge of the Cognition and Culture, we call them streams. And in my stream there are five independent projects. The one is called Interacting Minds, which consists actually of neurologists Chris Frith and Uta Frith from London, they are really interesting people. Money has been used to buy scanning machines, where you can do some interaction studies. But they also helped doing other stuff. Like, for example, I am interested in mysticism, and I will be working with them on retrospective analysis of Teresa of Avila. They are very interested in the humanities. So that’s one project. The other project is called Agency, which is run by the anthropologists, and they want to do fieldwork and do some experiments on terms of agency. Then there is the RCC, where Jesper is the one, who is the main person, in terms of MINDLab, where he’s doing studies on Ritual and Agency. And then there is a project on what is called Evidence, which some philosophers are running and their job is actually to do an analysis of the whole MINDLab project from the Philosophy of Science perspective. And then the last one in our group is from the business school – and they’re interested in how emotions influence people in their decision-making. So they’re doing interesting experiments with people. They are going out to a large businesses and using the employees, putting them in different rooms and then teaching them some things and then then switch them and see what happens when the others come in with another procedure the other ones have learned. And they are doing videos on them and they strap them in with heart rate things and that kind of stuff. So it is those kinds of projects, that we are working on. It is exciting.

So when I am talking interdisciplinary, I really mean it – I mean it physically, emotionally and intellectually – it is happening. And when people ask me how do we get the CSR to develop and I say go over to the neurologists and talk with them. Or maybe psychologists, depending on how they react to cognition – there are many psychologists, who don't want to hear the word cognition. And brain. But some are very much interested and it's useful to get into touch with them. That's where the money is – medicine. Sooner or later it will start a snowball effect, that work
all the time, with everybody who's interested in cognition. You see people at your university from the strangest disciplines, that are interested in cognition, get into contact, have regular meetings, start something, that's interdisciplinary. Regular meetings every month, where people from all different disciplines meet to hear interesting talks or discuss interesting projects... That's how we did it.

Then sooner or later it starts accumulating and suddenly there is so much going on, that has to give something. It did there. I was getting a little bit desperate towards the end because we did a lot of applications. During the years I think I made like 15 different applications. Quite a lot of time that is wasted. I think for the MINDLab I spent at least a full working month and I wasn't even the main applicant, I was just one of seven, but it took that long.

Sacra
Do you think, that applying cognitive approach in Religious studies should have a practical impact on how the departments are organised? That students should have some compulsory psychological or neuroscientific background?

Armin W. Geertz
Good question. Something I did not mention, but we actually quite early on introduced an obligatory course in psychology of religion for everybody. For both people who choose it as minor and people who choose it as major. And they get it during their bachelor years. And when I talk about psychology of religion, I am not talking William James, it's basically CSR. We call it Psychology of Religion, I wanted to get them to call it CSR, but they wouldn't. And the reason was quite sensible. This is the curriculum comitee, which consists of three teachers and three students or something, so students are very much involved in deciding what's going on. And they were all for it, the students were my main supporters in the whole thing. Anyway they said that if I get sick or if I quit or if I am gone, someone else will come in and teach and maybe they will be teaching William James, who knows. So they wanted to leave it open, so I said okay. The compendium of the texts that we use, it's called an Interdisciplinary Psychology of Religion. The whole idea is, that all of ours students must know the main names in the CSR, so they read Boyer and they read Lawson and McCauley, they read Whitehouse, but they also then read people we think are interesting like Merlin Donald, Quinton Deeley and people like that. And they are of course reading us. We are interesting too. And they get some pages, where they can read about history of psychology of religion, but I don't talk about Freud or Jung or anybody like that, or James for that matter. It's all rather new. It's a course, it's not a subject in itself. And we give courses in english as well on graduate level. And anybody can come from anywhere in the world and do a Ph.D. in CSR. Right now we are trying to develop a masters program in CSR. This is something, that Jesper is working on. It's quite bureaucratic, we have to go through a lot of institutional channels before we are allowed to do it. So hopefully we'll be able to start it next year, probably in September, if it goes well. Anybody can come and get an individual series of either courses or one-to-one work with a senior in the CSR.

Sacra
Excellent. I think that would be everything for the record. Thank you very much.

Armin W. Geertz
My pleasure.