Rozhovor s Thomasem E. Lawsonem

Redakce Sacra

Prvního workshopu Laboratoře pro experimentální výzkum náboženství (LEVYNA), nesoucího název Past, Present, and Future in the Scientific Study of Religion, se účastnil také profesor Thomas E. Lawson. Redakce Sacra využila této příležitosti a nabízí Vám rozhovor s jedním ze zakladatelů kognitivní vědy o náboženství. Rozhovoru se účastnili Eva Klocová, Jan Krátký, Radek Kundt a Martin Lang.

Thomas E. Lawson je momentálně čestným profesorem na Institution of Cognition and Culture (ICC) na Queen's University v irském Belfastu. Společně s Dr. Donaldem Wiebem a Dr. Lutherem Martinem založil North Association for the Academic Study of Religion (NAASR) a působí jako výkonný editor v Journal of Cognition and Culture. V minulosti byl také spoluzakladatelem a prvním prezidentem Interantion Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion (IACSR).

Lawsonova práce se soustřeďuje především na výzkum vlivu běžných kognitivních procesů, které jsme získali v průběhu evoluce a jejich vlivu na přenos komplexních náboženských představ a praktik s nimi spojených. Je znám především díky propracované teorii rituálu, kterou vytvořil společně s Robertem McCauleym. S ním také napsal své dvě nejznámější knihy – *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (1990) a *Bringing Ritual to Mind: Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms (2002).*

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Sacra

You are known to have rethought religion, something which is a very discussed and problematized topic, as we all know very well. So, after rethinking this topic, what could you tell us about it, or, more strictly, what is your definition of religion?

Tom

Oh, boy, that is wonderful! My definition of religion is always focused upon actual behavior rather than an abstract system. I think religion is a kind of behavior, associated with counterintuitive agents. Period. That is my definition of religion. You obviously noticed that the key term is counterintuitive agents – I used to say superhuman agents, but I never used the term supernatural. Because the term supernatural is a metaphysical term. That means that you can possibly conceive of something beyond the natural and I do not think that human minds can. We have an imaginary world, but that is not supernatural. But the term superhuman means that we can imagine beings that have more power, more knowledge, more anything that we have. But I focus on the behavior itself because that is something you can see.

Sacra

But the problem is: who is making this distinction? If we, for example, do not understand the language of the believer, can we make this assumption on his/her behalf or even on the group's behalf that they are in fact performing a ritual? Which we assume is a religious ritual, because from our folk belief system they are connecting their actions with something that is superhuman, supernatural. So do we have to actually impose our intuitions (views) or are those intuitions universal to all humankind?

Tom

That is exactly right. The scientist proposes a theory or has a hypothesis about what is going on, that is all we can do. That is what the theory of mind is all about. I cannot actually see what is going on in your mind. So, the theory of mind means that in fact I can, on the basis either of simulation or theory, attribute to you mental operations of these kinds. So when I am looking now at the believer, the person who is practicing ritual, I obviously have come up with a theory of what is going on inside of the head of that person. Now, if I only have that, I have not said very much. It is not very important yet. I have to be able to devise the kind of experimental procedures that give me some confidence that I might be right. That is why finally, in the cognitive science of religion, we are beginning to devise those experiments. The earliest experiment that I know of is the one by Barrett and Keil in 1996. They told stories and the most amazing thing about that experiment is that it showed that our minds systematically distort information. Because the kind of information that was actually in the story is not the kind of information we remember. We distort it towards our folk psychology.

The second experiment in CSR was the one he (Barrett) and I did. And there is, by the way, an interesting story about that. I said: "Justin, have you read my book Rethinking Religion…?"Justin: "Not yet, I will." So I said: "Ok, well read it, please, and then we can talk about it." (Did you hear? Justin said there are 98 hypothesis and predictions? Only 2 have been tested so far and the book is 22 years old – that shows you how slow the CSR is, but anyway…) I said: "Let's design an experiment to at least test some of our beliefs about the gods and specifically some of the claims we have made in Rethinking Religion." He said: "Oh, that is easy…" It took us seven months to design that experiment. They do not come easy, you know. Sometimes when you talk to Harvey Whitehouse it sounds like you can invent them just like that, but the fact of the matter is that sometimes it takes you a great deal of work to be able to imagine what it would be like and to design an experiment.

One of the best ways of designing experiments, I have discovered, is simply making people listen to stories and then getting them to make judgments about the stories. Because by getting them to make judgments you are in fact tapping their intuitions. I think that our intuitions play a fundamental role in the way we deal with the world and especially in religion. That is why I am one of the people that are arguing that religion is a by-product of our ordinary mechanisms, rather than Jesse Bering and all those people who think that religion is a direct adaptation from the evolutionary point of view; I think that this is a great mistake.

Sacra

Having mentioned evolutionary theory previously, what do you think the role of evolutionary theory is in the CSR?

Tom

Oh, the role of evolutionary theory for the understanding of religion? Oh, yeah. I think that… I love the metaphor that Tooby and Cosmides came up with. The metaphor is: Cognitive science was climbing up one side of the mountain, evolutionary psychology was climbing up the other side of the mountain and they met on the top and said: "We have something to say to each other!" Which is really wonderful because usually when you climb up a mountain and meet somebody else, you usually think he is your enemy. But cognitive science and evolutionary psychology recognized they were friends with each other. And I think that this is a very very important moment in science, because, on the one hand, people like me started highly abstractly with rules and principles, you know, hinting at these other things, not really worrying about everything else going on at the biological level. So what we were in a sense trying to do was to theorize about a model of the kinds of cognitive processes going on when a person for example has an idea, a representation of something important in life.

And then, all of a sudden, when we met the evolutionary psychologists who actually had completely different projects in mind, at first, their point was: "Look, you cannot ignore the fact that human beings have a brain and that the brain is what is doing the actual processing and once you know you are looking at the brain and furthermore that you know that the brain is processing many different kinds of things then clearly we'd better have an evolutionary account of how the brain got that way." And so that is exactly what evolutionary psychologists have taught us – that it is very very important to see how the brain got that way. Now, once we begin to think how the brain got that way, we then begin to realize that the old simple-minded way of dealing with the brain (or the mind-brain perhaps is a better term) – simply that the brain is a machine that processes information – is far too simplistic and that is where the idea of domain-specificity began to emerge. First of all, just think in terms of our ordinary senses: to see something is not the same as to hear something, to touch something, to smell something, to feel something and all this and that. So at least even at that level already our body is a whole, but in a sense governed by the brain. Our bodies as a whole are complex instruments with many different kinds of capacities. So why not then begin to think of the different kinds of capacities and see what those particular capacities are responsive to. And that is why you get the notion of both the mechanism or capacity and the kinds of entities in the environment or stimuli in the environment that connect with those capacities or trigger them in some kind of way.

And then a lot of work began to deal with that. Now, interestingly enough, let's jump back to cognitive science for a moment. Jerry A. Fodor in the early days, in his book *The Language of Thought*, argues for the notion of the modularity of the mind. Now what he actually meant and what actually happened to that idea is very very interesting. Because he didn't mean what later cognitive scientists took him to mean. He only meant that on the perceptual level there were individual modules that recorded information, but he didn't think that you could have a theory of cognitive processing on this final executive level, you see. And finally

when a person like Dan Sperber came along he set the modularity all the way up, in fact he uses the ...kind of crazy modularity, what was it?... yeah, massive modularity. Then I think that, wow, really shook everybody up.

And to this day there is a real tension, but no one any longer argues that there are no capacities. You see, that is just universally accepted. Even behavioralists have come to recognize that.

Sacra

So far it seems to me that you have mentioned just the biological aspects of evolutionary theory. If we have a brain, we need to think about how it got to the state it is now in. But what is your opinion about something which is called cultural evolution?

Tom

Yeah, this is ...I am very suspicious. I am afraid it just does not turn me on. And I'll tell you why, for a very simple reason. I know that the most important idea that was developed in the 20th century was the idea of information, and information is any stuff out there that makes a difference to the kind of stuff going on in my brain. That's what information is. Now, once we know that there is information out there, which nobody denies… for example, there is information about you up here, so that if my eyes were up there, I would see an aspect of you that I cannot see right now. So there is information in the environment and also there are perspectives in the environment. So far so good.

But information without a mind is absolutely dead. So if I go to a statue and I was told this morning that the statue contains a memory, you know, or something – well, if I do not know what that memory is, I just see a statue. The only thing I know for sure is that it is an artifact. So what I see as interesting about cultural evolution is that these people got a good idea and the good idea is that the mind got so clever that it became kind of disconnected from biological evolution, because it takes so long. But the fact that matters is that the capacities are all there. The capacities have been there for millions of years. So it is capacities we need to focus upon and there is nothing wrong with the notion of cultural features, the cultural things out there, which is to say that there are things out there that human beings made themselves that in a sense trigger the kind of capacities that we have. But the trouble is the culture. People like Richerson and Boyd, they are really trying to tell you a co-evolutionary story and they are really trying to put a great deal of the causal factors on the level of cultural analysis itself, and I am afraid that just leads us astray. So I'm not particularly deeply moved by the notion of cultural evolution.

Sacra

Do you consider the CSR to be a paradigmatic shift in the study of religions? And if yes, will the CSR be overthrown by other paradigmatic shifts? Will the CSR be forgotten and put aside as a useless method?

Tom

Yes, I think, first of all, it was a paradigmatic shift. I actually had a wonderful talk with Thomas Kuhn once. I started out as a Popperian, the logic of scientific discovery, refutations and all those claims, and I was deeply impressed by Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. But anyway, I think it was a paradigmatic shift. If you look just at the history of psychology – I happened to be at a university in which the whole Psychological Department was behavioristic; Skinner used to

come regularly and 3,000 people would show up to listen to him. And, in fact, I think that everything which behaviorism argued for is still true. How do you like that? It's all the things that they argued against that are not true. Skinner was unwilling to theorize about the black box (i.e. brain) and what CS did was to discover that you can not only theorize what was going inside the black box, but also that you can show that you cannot predict the output solely on the basis of the input – that you also needed to know what the internal dispositions were that would predict the output. And once you see that it becomes really exciting – that was a paradigmatic shift, a fundamental change in the revolution. The next move really now is cognitive neuroscience. Now once again, don't make the mistake, we are not going to abandon CS, which is where Kuhn over-does it. Because it's not as you would abandon the previous paradigm; only the eliminative materialists believe that you abandon it. Anyway, cognitive neuroscience is already beginning to make major discoveries. And I think that's where things are going and it's a very important direction. And that's not going to be the end of it either, because there is going to be changes in the future that we can hardly imagine right now.

Sacra

The CSR seems, for some people, like a kind of new very suspicious activity. When they try to understand it, if they make the effort, they usually end up thinking that it didn't bring to them any new methodology they might actually use. What they usually have trouble with is when they see the evolutionary theory applied to explaining cultural phenomena; they see it as taking too big a tool to understand something concrete, it's like taking a hammer instead of pliers. It doesn't provide them with a useful methodology to make any real contribution in their line of work. Would you have something to say about that?

Tom

I believe I have. I was in a department like that... Now, if we could persuade those people, "we're your friends, man, not enemies…" We are simply arguing that when that person in ancient Rome or Greece worships this particular god in this kind of way, there are psychological processes going on and perhaps you should look closely at these processes because you might figure out something that you would never understand by simply using your own methods. So I think they can learn from us. Because if you are going to deal with the transmission of knowledge from generation to generation, which is what historians do, you better know what kinds of minds [are transmitting information], what the constraints are on minds transmitting information. You need to have a theory of what's going on in the mind in order to be able to deal with the transmission of information. So I think that's not a hammer when you only need a little tooth pick, you see. By the way, this is where a lot of the information from evolutionary psychology can come in, when we try to figure out, you know, contests of will between people and past history. But you're right, the suspicion is there. It took many years for the American Academy of Religion to even acknowledge that there was something called the CSR.

My idea there was, it was a very provocative idea at the time, to really show the rest of the world that there really is the development of an experimental tradition in the strangest place in the world outside of social sciences or the biological sciences, namely the humanities. I am fascinated by the history of science. Some of the most creative things that emerged in the history of science did not come out of

the establishment. So I think that these ideas emerged in another context entirely. The earliest reaction that I got when I began to do the stuff that I was doing was just: "Don't do it!" No kidding. I had a friend who was the philosopher of physics and Bob McCauley and I were invited to a very early meeting of the Midwest Cognitive Science Society. They were the only people willing to listen to our chapter 5 which had been rejected by a number of journals. So, Bob and I went before Bill Bechtel, Joan Straumanes, and a number of very well-known philosophers of science and we presented our ideas, about 20 of them were there. We got a standing ovation. No kidding! Standing ovation. They were just absolutely astonished that someone had actually the idea to apply these techniques from linguistics to a cultural phenomenon like religion. They were just astonished. And then my friend Joan Straumanes came up later, gave me a big hug and said: "Tom, I really admire what you have done, but stop it! You are going to make religions respectable." How do you like that? Respectable… as a subject matter. Because they were still convinced they were all superstitions, you can ignore them, we live in the modern world, you know, forget it. Heh! And all I said was: "Religion will be here forever. On the basis of what we know about science, there will always be religion, that is all there is to it. And Joan was so upset because of that and when I used to talk to the social scientists at my university once again, including behavioral psychologists, oh man! "Why are you wasting your time!" I was invited to be a faculty member in the linguistics department. You know, Linguistics! Forget religion! "We will give you a wonderful job!" And the behavioral psychologists, they were quite willing to hire me as a cognitive psychologist: "We trust you! But not religion!" So, of course, then I got my back up: "Come on man, this is an interesting subject!"

Sacra

What are the constraints of cognitive science in explaining religions? What are the boundaries that cognitive science actually cannot cross?

Tom

Oh, what the CSR cannot explain? Everything in physics (laughing). There is a lot what CS cannot explain. Actually, I don't think CS is the magic bullet. I think that's the most important thing we can come to terms with and that's why I said we should no longer search for definitions. No, maybe that's too strong a word: you can search for definitions, but probably they will be most useful when they summarize what you already know. I think that the most important thing is that religion is a highly abstract term that sums up or gathers together a whole number of perhaps independent products of various kinds of capacities. So strictly speaking, there is no such thing as religion. But when you say this to an ordinary person, they freak out. "Hey, I go to church, what do you mean there is no religion?" Or, if you go to the dean of the university and say there is no religion, then he asks "Why do you have a department?" You have to be very careful to whom you say these things. But from the scientific point of view, the term religion is in a sense a conclusion. Not an organizing term. I like to make another distinction – the distinction between a subject matter and a theoretical object. Religion is not a theoretical object. Religion is a subject matter. It's something that you can talk about, but religious representations are the product of a whole number of mechanisms. They work very very well also in non-religious contexts.

Sacra

Once we touched on metaphysics, and you have got an interesting metaphysics; aren't you sometimes worried that the CSR might get polluted by the unawareness of metaphysical stances? – like New Wave Atheism and that kind of philosophy, which sometimes claims that that's the proper science of religion, even though they are actually making just claims about their atheism, their metaphysics?

Tom

Yeah, I think that's a valid fear. But it depends what the term New Wave means. What do you mean by that term?

Sacra

We meant mainly Richard Dawkins.

Tom

Oh, that stuff. See, I think that Dawkins has done all the wrong things. I really respect Dawkins and I have at home nearly all of his books; he is a brilliant writer; I wish he hadn't picked up the subject of religion. For example, I know Dan Dennett very well. I respect Dan's *Breaking the Spell* much more than Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*. Because Dan, at least in the first part of the book, tries to show that there is something called the CSR. In the second half of the book he then thinks that the knowledge produced by the CSR really ought to turn us all into atheists. I think that's simplistic. Now Dawkins reads all this stuff but he has an agenda: he wants to eliminate religion, because he thinks that religion has been a bad kind of thing in human history. Ha, I think I could think of far worse things than religion in human history. But, my criticism is not that he thinks that religion is a bad thing, it's that he has not used scientific knowledge available about religion to talk about why people have ideas about god. First of all, *The God delusion* is a false label. If he knows anything about science, there is a big difference between delusion and illusion. So the book is already misnamed. Is he saying that people are deluded? That means they are mentally ill, which means that he introduces the category without thinking about it at all. I think he is just a sloppy thinker when it gets to religion. He's a wonderful talker, I love to hear him, but I think he is irresponsible, because he's not fair. He is certainly not fair to the CSR, unlike Dan Dennett who is. So Dawkins? Forget him (laughing).

Sacra

When talking about paradigmatic shifts and big figures, we heard that you enrolled in one of Eliade's classes and then you dropped it because it was too boring. How was Eliade? Have you met him in person?

Tom

Yeah, I was at the University of Chicago when both Paul Tillich and Eliade were there together and I sat also in a seminar with both Tilich and Eliade. It lasted a little longer. I finally quit more in the middle. But Eliade's class ...it was just ultimately boring. He was the world's worst lecturer. You would come and sit in his class, you know, and he would say: "Ohhh ...we are going to look into this kind stuff today..." You know, he looked bored himself! I mean, I was looking for excitement. I am sorry, you know, I am one of those people always looking for excitement.

Sacra

What kind of exciting things are you working on now?

Tom

Right now I am doing fieldwork in South Africa. I have been going for the last three years to South Africa; I am actually studying Zulus and my student Michal Fuchs from Israel just came back from 13 months in South Africa… I am studying precautionary behavior from an evolutionary point of view; I am doing evolutionary psychology. I think that the two major capacities that human beings have are the response to immanent or immediate danger and we have tremendous knowledge about stuff done by LeDoux and people like that about fear responses in the presence of danger. We already know the behavioral repertoire for responding to danger: freeze, flee or fight. You know, the three Fs. So we know a great deal about fear psychology and the responses to danger. We do not know very much about human beings' response to potential danger – the possibility. There are much more subtle cues that we might be responsive to in the presence of possible danger. So that is what I am studying right now, and I am trying to relate the study of precautionary psychology to the cultural level of rituals. The cultural rituals actually reflect the underlying principles of evolutionary psychology at work. It is a very very exciting field, because very few people are working on it and as a result I have the chance to talk to all kinds of people; I am interested in people who study OCD (obsessive compulsive behavior), like the head of the international OCD society – a south-African by the name of Dan Stein, who is the head of Psychiatry at the University of Cape Town and David Eilam from Israel who is studying animal behavior.

Sacra

We also heard that you are an avid painter.

Tom

I've painted most of my life and I really was an art major first. Then, when I was in high school, I just by luck happened to meet a very famous South African artist by the name of Donald Madge and he offered to give me painting lessons free of charge for a whole year, which is one of the greatest experiences in my life, I can tell you. I am going to tell you a story: the very first day, when I went to him, he was painting in his backyard, in the South African winter, which by the way is twice as warm as yours, you know, the temperature is not cold at all, just a little windy. Anyway, he had an easel for himself up and one easel up for me. And he was sitting in his backyard in a South African winter with nothing to look at but a fence and he was panting this beautiful scene that he was imagining and I went "Oh, man!" and he said: "You see the row of cabbages there? Paint those cabbages!" And I asked myself if he was punishing me and what I had done wrong… I said to myself "Jesus, it has to be more exciting than that". But anyway, I am painting the picture and I keep sneaking up to him, "Man, that's good!" and all of a sudden, the wind came and just blew the thing over. It fell face down in the dirt, and I never forget this: he picked it up and said "That's interesting." And that is when I learned what art is about… and then he put it up there and the sand was in it and it gave him texture and he began a real dark painting. It was still a landscape, but it was a really ultra-modernistic landscape with dark and light and reflections. And I said to myself "Man, this guy is who I want to study with!", so after that I painted whatever he told me, because I knew, if I could learn from that guy, I'd learn something. So I tried all kinds of things. I do realistic stuff; I do wholly abstract stuff and everything in between.