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Rozhovor s Jesperem Sørensenem

Redakce Sacra¹

Minulý podzim se v Brně konal workshop, nazvaný *Loose Ends in the Cognitive Study of Religion and Culture*, o kterém vám přineslo zprávu již *Sacra* 2/2009. Při této příležitosti uskutečnila redakce *Sacra* interview nejenom s profesorem Arminem W. Geertzem, které jste si již měli možnost přečíst v minulém čísle časopisu, ale též s jeho kolegou Jesperem Sørensenem.

Jesper Sørensen působí v současnosti jako odborný asistent specializovaného pracoviště *MIND Lab* na Ústavu religionistiky Aarhuské univerzity. Podílí se na několika projektech zaměřených na kognitivní výzkum rituálního chování, charismatu a náboženské autority. V letech 2005–2006 působil na Institutu kognice a kultury v Belfastu (*Institute of Cognition and Culture, Queen's University*) či v Laboratoři paměti a vývoje v St. Louis (*Memory and Development Lab, Washington University*). Je zakládajícím členem Mezinárodní asociace pro kognitivní vědu o náboženství (*International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion, IACSR*) a autorem knihy *A Cognitive Theory of Magic* (2006).

Sacra

I would love to welcome Jesper Sørensen for our interview. Thank you very much that you agreed to do the interview for our journal. It is going to be very informal, as usual. Let me open it with a practical question which is going to be connected to the *MIND Lab*. You have recently become a *MIND Lab* associate professor. Could you please describe to our readers what your duties are and what it is all about?

Jesper Sørensen

The *MIND Lab* was this big grant application inside the university. I think Armin [W. Geertz] told you a bit about it already. Armin asked me – and at the time I was at another university so this was a very secret offer – whether I wanted to participate in the application. I said yes and then later he asked me, “what do you want to do for five years if we get it?” So, I had to write my small piece, which was probably all of ten lines in this big application, because of all the people involved, and I wrote that I wanted to work on ritualized behavior, and that we had some very precise ideas about how ritual effects cognitive processes. Then suddenly we got the money and we had to move the family etc., etc. But the whole

¹ Rozhovoru byli přítomni Jakub Cigán, Aleš Chalupa, Eva Klocová, Silvie Kotherová a Radek Kundt. Prepisu se ujali Blaine Billingsley a Radek Kundt.

deal was not really settled, as far as what the work really consisted of and that had to be negotiated between the different faculties and the university. But as I understand, the final deal, if it is final, will be something like 20 % of my work is at the Department of Religion and the other 80 % is in the *MIND Lab*, which is predominantly doing research, as well as counseling Ph.D. students, arranging meetings and conferences, going for new grants, etc., etc., but mostly actually doing some practical research and getting some stuff published.

Sacra

You will be actually the one who will design the experiments?

Jesper Sørensen

Armin and Jeppe [Jensen] also have their own project and have some ideas they want to fulfill but they haven't got the particular money to buy them off of teaching. So I am the one, I actually only have to teach one class every semester. On the other hand I have to deliver in terms of doing research! At first I thought I was going to work with myself, but fortunately I got some other people involved – some Ph.D. students of Jeppe Sinding Jensen's – that had actually worked on some of the stuff on ritual before I became inspired by it. He had already started and wanted to do some simulation studies with neural networks, and then we started discussing how we could do some of these practical experimentation into the ritual. We are going to run the first ones at the end of this month. If you ask people studying religion what this has to do with religion it's going to be a long story, but basically what we do is we have small sequences of ordinary action and of sequences where we are taking the exact same actions as the first one but put them in a different sequence so that there are no causal relations between the subparts, and what people have to do is sequence the action. This is a paradigm people have been working in called Action sequencing studies, [which is] how people connect all the small parts of an action into a big sequence, and [our] hypothesis is that people in the ritual condition – which is very operationalized here and is basically non-causal – will keep signaling at a very low level because you can't build this schema, whereas the rest doing a habituation will press the button at this and this time. This is basically a laboratory experiment and we are running some pilots. It seems to be working but time will show whether it does work. If it doesn't we will have to start again.

Sacra

That is how the science works. How do you actually go about designing such a project? Do you have a sort of contract with neuroscientists or with the hospital researchers?

Jesper Sørensen

MIND Lab consists of stuff that was already there in Aarhus University. There was this group of people called Insights of Minds which also had Chris and Uta Frith involved, and they meet once a week for an hour and somebody presents some stuff. But there are also some psychologists involved in the *MIND Lab* as well, and this is something I really wanted because none of us are trained in psychology. I mean, I had done some experiments while I was in Belfast, but this was kind of trying to work from scratch using paradigms already existent [there]. Here we also do have some paradigms, but we couldn't just adopt them directly because they weren't measuring the differences we're after. So we have a psychologist called

Daniel [Campell-Meiklejohn] who helps us out with the practical stuff. So when we figure out how we could [test a hypothesis] we run it by him and he says, “No, you can’t do it this way, why don’t you go this direction instead?” So he is kind of an experimental consultant, you might say. This is really the great thing about the *MIND Lab*, the whole idea that you actually have people from philosophy of mind and the business school all the way down to medical neuroscience, working on all these levels. There is always somebody to help you out if you have questions. We are not going directly for the scanning stuff, at least not yet. We might do this later if this shows to have a potential, if we actually get a huge affect we might try and see whether we can reproduce some of the results in a scanner. But, we actually have to have pretty strong hypotheses about which parts of the brain should be activated in order for it to make sense. I mean, there is no sense in just putting people into a scanner just to say “let’s see what happens.” You still only get these blobs. At least it is our opinion that we need pretty strong cognitive models before we go to the brain stuff. So, it might take a few years.

Sacra

Did you actually get the money to buy the big machines for yourself?

Jesper Sørensen

I think that before *MIND Lab* there was Center for Functionally Integrative Neuroscience and they were saving some money already before they got the *MIND Lab* grant for big equipment, and some of the *MIND Lab* money is also for equipment. But really, for what we are doing we need only computer screen. I mean, the stuff we are doing are behavioral studies so they are not expensive in terms of lab set up; we need a lab that is soundproof with machines that run the proper programs to actually detect when people are pressing the button and are able to make a transcript of it. That’s in place now, but really it’s not very expensive – we could probably have borrowed it from the psychology [department]. There are people from psychology involved in the *MIND Lab* project as well.

Sacra

You have mentioned you were at the different university when you applied for this stuff. Is there any other rivalry between the departments within Denmark?

Jesper Sørensen

No, only like the kind of stuff between you and Prague! There is some between Aarhus and Copenhagen, but I mean there’s still a friendly relation. The way I was, in the University of Southern Denmark, I was in the smallest department and everyone kind of understood that I wasn’t going to stay there forever. At that university there was neither psychology nor anthropology, I was the only one doing cognitive science – there were a few working in linguistics, but that was it. There was nobody to really work with. And besides that I was the head of educational programming *and* teaching 6 hours a week, so I didn’t do any research at all. But there is no kind of direct competition in that sense. The religion department at Aarhus did not participate in the university’s bid for this model [*MIND Lab*]. I don’t think the religion department in Copenhagen did either in their programme. I mean, of course there is some competition and rivalry, but no violence or anything like that [laughs]!

Sacra

Do they still have phenomenologists in the circle?

Jesper Sørensen

No, not in the kind of Eliadian sense. But I mean, in a certain sense Jeppe Sinding Jensen, who was my supervisor and now colleague at Aarhus, has defended phenomenology as a term that we should keep. But there was actually two strains of phenomenology if you look back in the last 50 years. There was the van der Leeuw or Eliadian approach, but there was actually a Scandinavian approach which was much more concerned with making a taxonomy of religious phenomena, and it didn't have this notion that it was some kind of sacred epiphany of different cultures. They were more concerned about exactly mapping out different types. They didn't really explain much though; it was, to a certain extent, a barren approach, because it only did a taxonomy. You could say that the cognitive science of religion is reviving that type of phenomenology in the taxonomy of religious phenomena – if we can really distinguish religious phenomena from *other* phenomena – and when we make these taxonomies we attempt to describe and explain what really underlies each of the phenomena as well.

Sacra

You said that you had been the only one doing the Cognitive science under Southern University. How do you personally see the Cognitive science of religion as part of the system of the Scientific study of religion?

Jesper Sørensen

Well, Aarhus is probably the place in the world where it has its strongest foothold, at least within departments of religion. It's not very strong. I mean, it's getting more people but a lot of them are scattered, like in the situation I was in. They are very isolated with only a few colleagues who are interested in cognitive science in general, but that's it. It is not this takeover situation that was presented by some of the critics in the IAHR regional conference a couple of years ago in Stockholm. One of the keynote speakers used his whole keynote to attack the Cognitive science of religion, and one of the areas he attacked was its "hegemonic status." I was sitting there... and it's strange to be the "hegemonic" force in the study of religion if you are the only one amongst 120 people who are doing all kinds of other stuff. So, the Cognitive science of religion has had a concrete impact – these book are actually being read. And some books, like Pascal Boyer's *Religion Explained*, is actually being read outside our field. [The cognitive science of religion] apparently also has this reputation that clearly supersedes how many people actually do it. I think that's for several reason, and one of the reasons is and there are a lot of people interested in what they can learn from it. There was this novelty fact that this is something new. There is also the fact that is pissed a lot of people off because it used the word "Science". I think we have to recognize that there is quite a strong current in the study of religion informed by post-modernist and post-colonial studies, and, while they might not be full-fledged post-modernists today, they are still really, really skeptical about people using the very concept of science because they see it as a mantle of authority. Some think we just use this word science in order to bolster our own authority. And to a certain extent some proponents of Cognitive science of religion, I think, *have* been guilty of this, using the concept of science to say that this is the only approach that works. I don't think that's the right way to go about it. I don't know, I was brought up differently in my education. They had already, in the early 90s, changed it to the Science of religion

in contrast to this kind of postmodern “interpretivism.” It wasn’t supposed to be Cognitive science necessarily it was just the idea that we do some method! But, I think in that sense cognitive science gained a lot of a reputation. There are a lot of young researchers who are doing a lot of writing; people were and are producing articles and stuff. Still, if you look at leading journals you have several issues with nothing even mentioning cognitive science.

Sacra

On the very same note, do you see any other particular approaches which should accompany the Cognitive science of religion, such as Rational choice theory?

Jesper Sørensen

In a certain sense I am a “methodological eclecticist,” because you can’t say that the Cognitive science of religion is really *one* approach. It might be a certain way of looking at a certain number of problems, and there are some standard theories out there, but I’m not sure it can or should insulate itself – it has certain approaches in common but that’s about it. And no, it’s definitely not the only one [approach to the study of religion]. It depends on what we want to study. If you are studying a historically dead religion, it’s very hard to do with cognitive science alone. It won’t get you far. But it might, from that perspective, be more inspirational depending on what kinds of questions you want to answer. Also, how you question your source material. So no, I think it is supplementary to other approaches.

Sacra

Pascal Boyer is a colleague of yours whom you have worked with a lot. How is he?

Jesper Sørensen

Oh, he’s a very nice guy! A lot of people think when they read him that he is very polemical and hard. He’s not when you’re speaking to him, but he is a very astute thinker. He’s very clear in his mind, and he has very particular ideas he wants to pursue. People, when they read him, have a tendency to forget the first parts, where he usually delineates pretty clearly *what* he is interested in. Later on he is often accused of trying to explain *everything* by means of that, but he actually usually says in the beginning that he’s interested in this very particular problem and he has operationalized it *this* way and he believes he’s told something about *this* [particular] aspect. It was really interesting working with him because he is very systematic in his way of going about it. For me it was nice learning this way – he moved from anthropology into psychology so he could kind of follow where *I* was in trying to learn some of these methods of experimental psychology.

Sacra

The Cognitive science of religion has changed very much since the 90’s. What do you think the role of CSR is now in comparison to the beginnings?

Jesper Sørensen

In a certain sense the beginning of CSR seems to be working on these established paradigms set up in the cognitive sciences in general, so you have Lawson-McCauley using Chomsky and linguistics to build up a theory of ritual. To a certain extent, Pascal Boyer came out with the domain specificity school of east coast cognition. The major difference in the new millennium was the biological turn. Pascal Boyer already had a biological angle in his earlier books, but this has already gained hugely in importance since. When I was a student in the 90s it was kind of taboo to

talk about evolution and religion in the same sentence. If you did, it was only to say that you shouldn't put the two together, and that has definitely changed. This biological turn has been interesting within cognitive science itself because it has questioned the paradigm of reliability or "realizability". The same cognitive process can be instantiated in any kind of hardware. There was this notion of the brain as hardware, that cognitive processes can function independent of the medium, and that has been questioned on biological terms. Our brain's way of functioning is constrained in a biological sense, and I think that's a major difference. This opens up a whole lot of different types cooperation with biologists and it also brings up the questions of embodiment and physicality into the question again – we are basically organisms trying to survive and our whole cognitive processes are dedicated to solving particular problems. Of course, these discussions go on about how much and to what degree, and hopefully these discussions will continue. I don't think that that question will ever be answered in total. But I think people are tending to agree more than they were 10 years ago. I think it is an interesting field because it keeps on evolving and changing.

Sacra

On a different topic. You're going to write part of a book which is aimed for public. How rare it is to make the sciences a public matter in Denmark?

Jesper Sørensen

There is a long tradition in Denmark of doing this, and I think there is also a tradition outside of Denmark. A lot of scholars have done it, although it might work different in different countries. In the Danish law ruling our universities, it says that 10 % of our work should go to public dissemination. This can be done in a lot of different ways – a lot of people give public papers. This book that I am doing is part of a series by Aarhus University Press – they asked Tim Jensen if he wanted to do it and he said "well, if I can do it with a couple of my colleagues, then I'll do it," and they said yes. This is *far* too many years ago, by the way – this is 2003 or something like that! And then I took off a couple of years abroad, and Tim Jensen jumped from the project because he couldn't find the time. So me and Professor Olav Hammer from the University of Southern Denmark were the only ones left! Now we just turned in the final manuscript a couple of weeks ago. It's part of this series called the Universe, and the idea is that we want to make publicly accessible the dissemination of what the status is [of the sciences]. The book is called *Religion*, they have one called *Language*, they have one called *The Universe*, all these kind of broad topics. Olav Hammer is Swedish by birth, and he wrote his part in Swedish and I translated his into English, and now he's translating my part into Swedish as well, so now it's going to be published in Swedish! And if the publishers are happy, we might try to get it translated into Czech [laughs]!

Sacra

Is there such a tradition that university professors are writing material for high school students as well?

Jesper Sørensen

Yes, actually that's a pretty long tradition, because one of the things we do at the university is educate high school teachers. This is actually how we get our money, so there is a strong connection there. High school teachers are also doing it themselves, but there has always been this strong connection between universities

and the high school level. It's not the same with the primary and secondary schools – teachers of religion at the lower level have traditionally been more theologically influenced. Religion in the gymnasium has always been [taught by] people from the university. Before it was a field called “Christianity” but it was still distinct from theology, and now it's been broadened out. So in that sense this connection has always made university professors interested in it. Often it has been books that try to [cross over] – they can be used in high school but they can also be used as textbooks at the bachelor level at the university as well. So you are trying to, if you can say this in English, catch multiple flies with one hand!

Sacra

Don't know if in English but we have similar idiom in Czech! That will be all, thank you very much for your time!