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Rozhovor s Williamem “Lee” McCorklem

Redakce Sacra¹

William McCorkle (*1969) působí od září 2011 na Masarykově univerzitě jako zahraniční expert a vedoucí týmu v projektu LEVYNA. Jeho předchozí pracovní pozicí byla pozice odborného asistenta na Ústavu psychologie a sociálních věd na Tiffin University of Ohio. William McCorkle je absolventem Institutu kognice a kultury v Belfastu.

Původní zájem o náboženství Asie (především buddhismus) jej postupně ve spojení s kognitivním přístupem přivedl ke studiu rituálního chování a zacházení s těly a ostatky zemřelých. V roce 2010 vydal knihu *Ritualizing the Disposal of the Deceased: From Corpse to Concept*, která se tímto tématem hlouběji zabývá. Kromě svého vlastního výzkumu se také podílí na organizačních aktivitách – jako editor řady *Cognitive Science of Religion* nakladatelství Berlin Academic a také jako pokladník Mezinárodní asociace pro kognitivní studium náboženství.

Kromě těchto odborných zájmů a aktivit je nutné ještě zmínit, že William McCorkle je také velmi nadaným a schopným hudebníkem (vystupuje jako Leisure McCorkle).

Sacra

Welcome for the interview and thank you for agreeing to do it. So, the opening question will be a bit of an introduction of you. You are a cognitive scientist, you are an anthropologist and you are a musician, but I would like to know how do you identify yourself best?

Lee

Sure, sure. I used to think about my sort of life as split into different modules. When I would do music on, you know, at certain times and I would be in academic mode in other times, but over the course of last, say, maybe six-seven years I started to mix them interchangeably with each other. So, now I usually just identify myself as evolutionary anthropologist – I do cognitive sciences, which is sometimes problematic because many people that want to identify themselves as cognitive anthropologists start doing something completely different that I am interested in. I see evolutionary anthropology even though it's of the mind instead of physical things... I see that to be encapsulating who I am as an academic. Then, on the other side, I like to think of myself, as what I refer to jokingly as a futurist, which is a person, who is just involved in things that are going forward and looking to the next thing. That involves my music or my studies or my interests, you name it.

¹ Rozhovoru byli přítomni Eva Klocová, Martin Lang a Radek Kundt. Přepisu se ujali Eva Klocová, Martin Lang a Kateřina Štaštná.

Sacra

When we are talking about you as about “futurist”, how does it fit with doing the cognitive science? What do you think about cognitive approach in study of religion? Do you see any problems or loose ends? What do you think about the future of this approach (for example on institutional level)?

Lee

Futurist is a term to represent how theorists view the world through the lens of technology, achievement, and science. Typically this is the domain of the natural and applied sciences; however, I argue that social scientists and humanists have a role as well. I coin this “Anthrofuturist”. An Anthrofuturist is a person that forwards science and culture as one, acting in coordination together, rather than conflict. From a disciplinary and institutional perspective, it means the end of these hard divisions between topical and methodological areas. Education must be changed because it is failing in the modern world. Ideals of “education for everyone” is putting a large strain financially on The Global Economy, and so there needs to be innovation to support this education via changes in educational psychology and the delivery of learning to such massive amounts of people. I, and probably others, would proffer that “mass education” was meant to close the gap between the classes, but now it is has probably collapsed the gap between those left out, or with poor education, and those that receive a high education. The classical system (Oxbridge, Ivy League) that we have now does not support mass education, therefore, either we go back to the classical approach or we move forward using technology and culture to re-invent education. In the future, there will not be departments. I foresee a new “Humanist Scientific” approach that values skill sets, methods, and theoretical creativity.

Sacra

Those modes of your interests you mentioned before, is it somehow that CSR is inspiring you in music or that music also inspires you in what you are doing in academia?

Lee

Yeah, I mean, I have always used my academic background in the writing of lyrics and probably since I did music before, I was actually an academic, I guess, you could say that the things that I followed around the world actually made me a great well not a great but made me an anthropologist. Because what is songwriting? Songwriting lot of times is about the way in which you perceive the world and you categorize it in different ways from what everybody else might categorize it. But then when people, if people like it, they resonate with this in music – they somehow make meaning out of that particular resonance that you have described. I mean, what is a good song? A good song is something people can sing along to, but the really, really good songs are the ones which have this sort of this transition of that person who wrote the songs, lyrics. Sort of cognitive if you think about it, from mind to mind via sound and people then are able to make their own meanings out of these things. I mean, I think so. I did not think about that when I started out. I think they have definitely influenced each other. It is funny because now I have tried to write songs that are less loaded. Because I found that songs that I wrote, which are less loaded, are actually more attractive than the ones that have heavy information in it.

Sacra

What is your scientific training and what led you to cognitive science of religion? (How would you describe Tom Lawson as a teacher?)

Lee

I started in the physical and natural sciences (Geography, Astronomy, Physics, Biology) and also the science of Law. To me, the interesting part about working in CSR is the difficulty in applying natural laws to culture, and back again. The study of Law (i.e. ethics, morals, standards, codes, embedded beliefs) is the very substance of trying to create order from the chaotic world of nature. In many ways, I am involved in understanding how animals (especially humans) turn nature into culture. I didn't actually go to school originally to study with Tom Lawson. That man is a pure intellectual, who loves people. After the first day of his seminar in graduate school, I was hooked. He inspires students in the pursuit of discovery. I imagine it would be similar to have a mentor like Aristotle, or Einstein, or Stephen Hawking. As brilliant as he is, that man doesn't have the arrogance of lesser men. One of the best quotes from him, and there are hundreds, is when he told me, "I don't want you to do my theory, man! I want you to do your own thing." Tom Lawson led me to CSR. Total accident, but a good one nonetheless.

Sacra

Well, your own thing is the theory of ritual disposal of dead bodies – could you explain it a bit?

Lee

The reason why, of course people handle dead bodies in peculiar way, is because we, as a species, have a lot of dead bodies over the years. That's just sort of fact of the environment. We live and we die. However, the ways, in which we've evolved, have taught us that it's very important to us as individual biological beings, but us also as a society or culture, to treat people differently than we do other dead things. Sometimes, also domesticated animals, like dogs and cats and fish, got a special burial, but what I've teased out about this is that when person dies they violate what we have naturally as humans and probably the complex animals as well, is the sense of agency. We don't lose that agency really well. Now you can say the same thing for objects, but it's only with objects that get strange in the environment. If this bottle (pointing to a coke bottle) flies across the room, you don't have any other way to describe it. You sometimes revert back to your gut instinct which would be "there is a ghost". There is something through it, there has to be agency there to do it, whether it was the wind or what else. I think, Justin Barrett is probably right about this that we are hypersensitive to this particular thing. It makes good sense – if the bush wiggles and you don't snap to the agency, you might get eaten for lunch. It makes a lot of sense. But when agents get agency, they don't lose it because obviously we've learned to categorize people in our own social cultural world. But now that person is different, there is something about them. They had agency when they were living but now they don't have agency. First question is: where does the agency go? People know that a biologically dead person is dead, it's a dead thing just like an animal, but they can't let it go because the agency is not resolved. That person had a life and the closer you are to them of course they get this sort of person file system as what Pascal (Boyer) calls it or agent file system is what I like to call it. They are friends, they are relatives, or they look alike

somebody we know. But when agent loses the agency, there is something in the environment that says: I don't wanna be like that as an animal. But also where did the agency go? And when this particular thing happens, it's important to us as a species not to get dead like that thing, but also to resolve agency depending on how close it is to us. It triggers other systems that are involved in danger. I think that two of these systems are involved. One is disgust which has nothing really to do with the dead body because people touch, hug, kiss, throw themselves on, all kind of things. But disgust is triggered and why disgust? Because it's a very good evolutionary system, very low-level system, that gets triggered and people are then more cautious. And the other one is predation. I think that there is a very low-level system of predation, HADD (hypersensitive agency detection device) is how Justin (Barrett) calls it that says "Bam! Protect yourself but also protect the thing which is dead." I think in a lot of times is this system triggered from the top-down so I actually call this a sort of contagion psychological system. It's because this top-down effect triggers the bottom system to fire it then reinforce it: danger, whatever touched that thing, whatever did that thing, it's contagious. The place where that thing died is contagious. Things which aren't normally contagious are contagious. And when people then go to do these things, they naturally want to handle dead bodies in specific ways which get more complex when you go through history. But also they put it into behavior which we call in anthropology redistribution of who they were as a social cultural being. Because person is not just a biological entity, it's also social cultural person. So the Durkheimians have that part right. But when you get into the ways in which religion is related to these two things, notice that the body has now become what Pascal (Boyer) calls a counter-intuitive agent. It's a dead body that still lives on its own somewhere. Agents aren't dead, it's counter-intuitive. So the thing is that why would be religions interested in this? Religions come on the scene sometime around 5 000 years ago. The major religions start to formulate around the same time as literacy and writing. Why wouldn't you wanna be the ones that are these new political guild elite, that there is naturally occurring behavior in the environment, that needs someone to tell you what it means? Therefore, religions took a naturally occurring behavior that does not have a really scientific explanation 5 000 years ago and they provide the answers. So religious guilds take this behavior because it's widespread, everyone wants to do it, everyone feels a compulsion to do it. So then religion comes in and fulfills the meaning and the explanations for that particular cultural group.

Sacra

Does it mean that you see religion as, how to describe it, not as a by-product but rather as a construction over those evolutionary natural systems?

Lee

Yeah, I think, I totally agree with most people in anthropology like Maurice Bloch. He is one who has been an advocate of Pascal (Boyer) in that "religion is not a thing". It is an academic term, heuristic; it is what he calls a junkbox of cultural behaviours which we cannot really categorize in other ways. I like religiosity, better word, that actually goes back to Malinowski.

Sacra

Now, do you think that this behaviour with the dead bodies is a by-product?

Lee

I don't think these systems have evolved to handle dead bodies. They handle living bodies; they evolved to handle living bodies. So it is a byproduct of these same systems that are meant to handle living agents; social intelligence, like predation, these kinds of things – movement in the environment. These systems are being asked to do different things now. But I do think that religion saw some of this behaviour as being very beneficial to their growth and political, what is the correct term I should use, sort of transmission as a political unit to be successful. And utilize these things to create an environment in it incorporated these kinds of behaviours, ritual especially. They found these things very useful to construct this sort of cultural niche in which human beings find themselves. I mean, religions are very powerful institutions now.

I am not saying that a theologian or a Buddhist monk knows that this is why their religion has to say these things. They are not going to give a cognitive answer like that, I think. But I think that implicitly most religious institutional guardians, cultural sort of experts, people, who try to constrain these things into a doctrinal type of mode as Harvey (Whitehouse) calls it, are aware of this.

Sacra

Let's move to less theoretical questions. Can you tell us what are you up to these days? Or what are you planning for next half a year? I mean, we know that you are writing a book, you are working on project LEVYNA...

Lee

I have three books that I'm working on right now, one of these is an edited book with Dimitris Xygalatas and it is called *Mental Culture*. We asked the most of the modern theorists in CSR to write a chapter, where they take an older theorist's work and show, how this is not a new field, this is actually building of and over classical scholarship. One of the main critiques is that we were a new field, we're too weird and that this has nothing to do with religious studies. Well, in fact, this book is actually going to show that we have very much to do with religious studies and anthropology. The second book is called *The Evolution of Ritual*, which is where I am going to take ritual behavior and show, at least I hope to show, that it was a primitive form of communication, that it is the way in which people socialized before we had a complex language, that other social animals probably have some forms of this ritualized behavior and that slowly, as we humans develop communication skills, like language and writing, this spandrel or bridge from certain kinds of animal to a social animal is now so embedded in our evolutionary heritage, that it is impossible for us to give it up. It's impossible for us to give up ritualized behavior. So, therefore by consequence, we might say that no way that religions would go away, because there is always going to be someone who wants to take advantage of making the meanings of these particular behaviors. And then the third book is actually probably going to be my last book on religion, or in the field of religion. It is going to be a mainstream book and it is called *Religion: a cultural virus*.

Sacra

What about the LEVYNA project – do you see it as inspiring? Do you enjoy working with Czech colleagues?

Lee

I see the LEVYNA projects as having a lot of potential. We don't have these archaic models of Religious Studies, Anthropology etc. to conform to now. We still have to think out of this box sometimes because it is hard to work in an environment that constrains you with bureaucracy and institutional pressures. However, the group here at LEVYNA wants to branch out and claim a piece of emerging scientific inquiry about culture, cognition, and religion. Each week is a new challenge for me personally and professionally here. I enjoy the culture that we are creating every day. Some days the "red-tape" is difficult, but the reward is more than satisfying when I look back from where we started, and look forward to where we can go. I enjoy working with all people. The Czech colleagues that I work with now are just a small part of a larger global family that I hope to connect the project we are working on at LEVYNA. And, the beer is good too...

Sacra

The last question. You are in Czech Republic already few months – would you care to share some anthropological observations about Czech culture and Czech people?

Lee

Sure, what surprises me is that, well, there is a couple of things, I have some funny stories... I think, there is a transition going on, even though it is what – twenty years after the Velvet revolution, now? You have got this young, student oriented culture here in Brno that is wanting to be not completely western, not completely British or French or German or American, but still in with the West, but who still has an identity, that is Czech. And I can see this in a variety of ways. The funniest one is the money. In America or in Britain, it's common to just throw the money into your pocket and wrinkle it up – here is the filthy lucre – it's dirty money, it doesn't mean anything, it just buys you things, you know. Here, it is actually that: "Why do you wrinkle up the pretty money with our people on it?", So, in another words, it has some aesthetic value. And those aesthetics are related to politics and culture and these are important figures on it. Of course, George Washington is important figure in America, but no one cares rolling it up and throwing it across to buy something. So, the money is interesting, because the people look at the money really carefully at the shops, and they don't like it if you wrinkle them up. Several of my friends joke that we'll get you a little travel irons, so you can iron your money out.