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Religion and the Mind: Discussing Topics of Religion from the Perspective of Human Cognition

28.–29. 5. 2022, Kraków, Poland

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On the 28th and 29th of May 2022, the *Religion and the Mind* conference took place at the Jagiellonian University's Institute for the Study of Religions in Kraków. The Institute for Study of Religions at the Jagiellonian University is the only academic unit in Poland to offer an opportunity for a critical and interdisciplinary study of religion contained in one specialized programme (Instytut Religioznawstwa, n.d.). The location, therefore, makes the conference an important event in the context of the growth and development of secular studies of religion in Poland.

The event's originator was Matylda Ciołkosz, who had been teaching a course with the same title at the Institute. The course had a double topic – religion in the mind and the concept of the mind in different religions – and the conference reflected this duality. Initially, the conference was meant to be an addition to the course, but it became an international event during the preparation period. The conference organizing committee included PhD student Piotr Szymanek, graduate students Jarosław Gielczowski and Weronika Woyciechowska, and undergraduate students Krzysztof Lach and Agata Kielb. And the event received financial support from The Jagiellonian University Council of Student Organisations.

The conference was organized in a hybrid mode, which enabled quite a number of interesting topics to be discussed since participation was a lot more accessible for scholars, either based in more distant countries or with a tight schedule at the time of the conference. From the organization perspective, the first year was handled very well. There were minor technical issues, which were mostly solved quickly and caused only small delays. The conference generally adhered to its schedule, which consisted of three keynote speakers and six thematic sessions during which all the other delegates held their contributions.

Programme summary

The opening lecture was held by the first keynote speaker, Michiel van Elk, an Assistant Professor at the Cognitive Psychology unit of the Institute of Psychology at Leiden University in the Netherlands, where he heads the Psychedelic, Religious, Spiritual and Mystical (PRSM) experiences lab. He studies altered states of consciousness using a variety of different methods, including field research, phenomenology, psychophysical tools and neuroimaging techniques. Altered states of consciousness (ASCs) were also the main topic of his talk titled: *Experimental Research on Altered States*. Van Elk based his talk on a series of

studies that aimed to test the hypothesis that ASCs are a by-product of our ability for agency detection and mentalizing. He further highlighted the potential of using placebo-brain stimulation as an experimental tool for inducing ASCs and gave a speech on new developments in psychedelic research regarding the occasion of altered states of consciousness.

On the first day, four panel sections followed after the first keynote speaker. I will mention selected contributions which I found especially interesting. For the session on religious prosociality there was Michal Uhrin with his talk on ethnographic research of cooperation, specifically in relation between punishment and reciprocity. After that, Radim Chvaja discussed religious costly signals in comparison to secular costly signals and the amount of trustworthiness they induce. In the second session about experiencing religion Ingmars Lakas presented on experiencing hallucinations as ASCs initiating further religious commitment. This talk seemed especially rich as it followed soon after the first keynote speaker, Michiel Van Elk, who discussed ASCs in more depth. The third panel session focused on various meanings and narratives in religion. Dorota Wójciak discussed emic interpretations of Catholic rituals in the Podhale region in southern Poland. Vladimír Bahna theorized on the cognitive background of some counterintuitive concepts and narrative representations of the world and Bartosz Samitowski concluded with a topic of dreams common among Poles during radical transformation between years 2020 and 2022. This session provided a great insight on how religion may look in the mind from a more ethnographic point of view. The fourth panel session consisted of a single contribution by Jason Slone, Dimitris Xygalatas and James Van Slyke, where Xygalatas talked about religious behaviors which are considered to work as long-term mating strategies (e. g. religious veiling to control female reproduction).

After these panel sessions, there was an opportunity for all physically present participants and attendees to gather for an informal meeting, where they could further discuss topics they were interested in, build mutual networks or just enjoy a well-deserved break after a very long conference day. This social gathering took place at Piękny Pies, a legendary club in Kraków's Jewish district Kazimierz.

The second day of the conference was opened by the second keynote lecture given by Konrad Talmont-Kamiński with the title: *Method and Theory in the Study of Secularization: The Case of Fuzzy Fidelity as an Agent-based Model*. Talmont-Kamiński is an analytic philosopher and cognitive scientist, currently operating also as the head of the Department of Cognitive Sociology at the University of Białystok in Poland. Talmont-Kamiński described the methodology and the model he has been developing with several other partnering scholars (from Poland and Norway). The model was based on David Voas' fuzzy fidelity theory to better understand the secularisation phenomenon. The importance of this work lies in the fact that their model (which is still being further developed) takes into account both perspectives - of social causes of secularization, as well as individual psychological or cognitive processes, which are mutually interconnected and in the past were mostly studied separately.

There were two more panel sessions on the second day – one before and one after the last keynote lecture. Contribution I found most interesting in the fifth session belonged to one of the organizers Piotr Szymanek based on deity yoga

practice. He proposed a cognitive explanation of how one projects their identity onto a supernatural being resulting in an experience where that individual perceives themselves as physically unified with a specific deity.

The last keynote lecture was held by Radek Kundt, current head of the Department for the Study of Religions and director of LEVYNA (Laboratory for the Experimental Research of Religion) at Masaryk University in Brno, Czechia. In his lecture *Evolutionary Origin of Ritual Behavior in Humans*, Kundt proposed an evolutionary model of the origin of collective ritual in the hominin lineage that he co-developed with another colleague from LEVYNA, Martin Lang. They treat collective ritual as a complex signalling system that helps facilitate mutualistic cooperation. The signalling system they work with stands on signals of similarity, coalitionary signals, and signals of commitment to collective action as its base. Using their model, authors argue that collective ritual had been selected before the arrival of *Homo Sapiens* as a crucial adaptation to overcome collective action problems.

The last panel session followed after the third keynote. It was opened by my own contribution on practical and methodological advantages and disadvantages of using ethnographic databases for research of religious practices. This session contained an interesting talk by Karolína Sikorová, one of four student presenters from our department, about the role of beta-endorphins in connection to ritualized behavior and anxiety decrease.

Conclusion

I would like to emphasize that the conference was a success, both from the point of organization and execution and the academic perspective. It turned out to be an excellent opportunity to hear many inspiring contributions, shared opinions and questions asked in the discussions following each talk. I am certainly looking forward to another conference weekend spent at the Institute for the Study of Religions in Kraków in the future years of *Religion and Mind* conference.

References

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