

BOOK REVIEW

Student's name

Course

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Recently, cognitive science of religion has become a topic of interest to many people, including scientists, religion and theology scholars, faculty members, as well as students of seminaries and divinity schools. Professor of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary wrote a short textbook devoted to the cognitive science of religion and explored the role of mind in the human behavior with a significant emphasis on religious experiences and theology. The publication supported by the Templeton Foundation may be perceived as an invitation to the area of religious cognitive science, which can serve as the basis for others to rely on the discovered information. Mostly, the author pays attention to the problems that seem to be solved by the cognitive scientists. However, Barrett tries to draw implications for comprehension of religion and theology through understanding cognitive processes in the human mind.

The book contains nine chapters, first five among which are comprehensive. They offer a review of the field of cognitive science and its applications to the religious thoughts and theology. The book begins with the explanation of cognitive science, basic features of human thoughts, and common misperceptions connected with the composition of the mind. The last three chapters review more precisely the dialogue between cognitive science, religion, and theology, answering the questions how humans understand divine life and why gods are recurrent in different cultures. In addition, more specific religious topics are analyzed, including religious experience, spirit possession, religious rituals, reading scripture, and petitionary prayer. Moreover, the author discusses relations, connections, and mutual influence amongst cognitive science, religion, and theology. In conclusion, Barrett highlights the importance of further dialogue between cognitive science and religion regarding the way of disclosing deeper and less investigated aspects of the three fields of knowledge.

Each chapter begins with a summary of disclosed topics. In addition, the book includes more than twenty-five pages of author's notes, glossary, and the bibliography. The only criticism is that the author could have provided more profound analysis of some topics.

CHAPTER ONE

What is Cognitive Science?

The chapter is devoted to definition and explanation of the cognitive science and its relation to the theological issues as well as religious expression. The author stresses that defining and understanding human cognitive abilities are easy. At the same time, there exists a tension between the marvels of the human mind and biological and physical nature. Having analyzed the world's religious traditions, the author concludes that the understanding of the process of thinking is a crucial distinctive feature of the human nature. Additionally, it is stressed that the power of the human mind is the critical attribute of their successful survival and thriving. Moreover, the way humans operate religious information allows investigating deeper the nature of revelation and humans' understanding of scripture as well as the ability to differentiate the natural world from the divine one.

Human cognitive equipment is highly responsible for understanding religious ideas and practices. Thus, religious thought and action might be practically useful for the corresponding communities. Regarding personal implications of religious thought and practice, the author suggests that the human thought-producing equipment may overcome dramatic changes under the influence of religion. Later, focusing on human thought, Barrett tries to investigate cognitive science through understanding the thinking process. It is mentioned that neuroscience can answer all the questions concerning the functioning of the brain. However, the author is more interested

in mind than in brain. Further, in the respective chapter, the researcher mentions and analyzes the most critical cognitive processes, including perception, attention, memory, conceptualization, communication, reasoning, learning, decision-making, and imagination, as well as feelings and emotions. Having discussed 'cognitive scientists', the author analyzes in details the components of cognitive science, such as psychology, computer science, linguistics, neuroscience, philosophy, anthropology, and archeology. Further, the theoretical problems of cognitive science are discussed with its three main questions: 1) What is innate and what is not? 2) What is the best way of characterizing the mind? 3) What is the relation between minds and bodies? In the context of the relevance between cognitive science, religion and theology, cognitive science of religion is announced to be analyzed further in the book.

CHAPTER TWO

Features of Human Thought

The chapter starts with the discussion of the limitations that humans experience in learning, thinking, and remembering. The author stresses that all of them are easy to overcome. As an example of the full realization of the human cognitive potential, the trait of synesthesia is explained. At the same time, Barrett suggests that human minds have natural tendencies, limitations, and biases that are capable of making some ways of thinking more fluent. Further, general tendencies of the human mind connected with informing and constraining thinking processes are described. The mind-body problem is discussed, which suggests the existence of both dualists and monists. While investigating different problems of dualists and monists, the author proves that the mind is embodied, and that there is a working relationship between mind and body. In the context of the nature-nurture debate, it is stated that both environment and

biological endowment are important components of the cognitive development, and it is hard to state confidently if it is nature of nurture. Further, the author expresses his understanding of natural aspects by means of contrasting it to innate ones.

Then, McCauley's practiced and maturational naturalness is discussed. Regarding the issue of natural general cognition, the author discusses the corresponding limitations of general cognition and content-specific cognition. Resulting from a long and detailed analysis, Barrett concludes that mind is not a blank slate, rather it possesses some information while using it preferentially and differentially. In the context of the acquisition of theological and religious ideas, it is stressed that some of the human natural propensities are responsible for the process.

CHAPTER THREE

The Cognitive Origins of Beliefs

The chapter starts with the identification of the term belief that "often carries connotations of commitment and devotion to a set of propositions that less intellectualist religious traditions find uncomfortable."¹ Concerning the issues of confessional commitments and human cognition, the author explains his particular understanding of belief, and what it means to believe. Further, religious beliefs are discussed. Having mentioned conscious and non-conscious information, Barrett explains how the latter contributes to the belief formation in the area of theology and religion. Then, the role of testimony and credulity principle concerning the formation of belief is explained. Additionally, it is highlighted that along with social context of the testimony, prestige bias, conformity bias, and similarity bias are important components of some practices and ideas.

¹ Justin L. Barrett, *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology: From Human Minds to Divine Minds* (West

Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2011)

In the context of the two-system model of reasoning, the issues of Herbert Simon's bounded rationality and Kahneman's accessibility are discussed.

Moreover, two kinds of belief are analyzed, namely explicit or reflective and intuitive or non-reflective beliefs. In this regard, the relations and interaction between two kinds of belief are reviewed. It is concluded that intuitive belief serving as a default position fixes and informs the range of reflective beliefs. Additionally, intuitive belief informs the explicit one by means of leading credibility to reflective propositions.² At the same time, the author stresses that there is opposite interaction and influence that non-reflective beliefs have on the intuitive ones. Further, the author investigates context biases versus content ones in the prospect of belief formation. The chapter finishes with the discussion of the belief-formation process and true beliefs.

CHAPTER FOUR

How We Conceive of the World

In this chapter, the author offers more detailed analysis of the natural cognition, which is suggested to contribute considerably to the structuring of non-reflective beliefs. More specifically, this part is focused on the humans and their way of perceiving the surrounding world, on the issues why the things are what they are, and how everything functions. Barrett starts analyzing the wide conceptualizing of the world appealing to various religions and worldviews. Then, non-reflective categories of being, namely intuitive ontologies, are explained while depicting how the humans transmit the surrounding world into objects and categorize them.³

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Further, the author describes the steps of making sense of the world, namely coding the spatial layout, identifying things or objects, and conceptualizing minded items. All stages of understanding the world mentioned above undergo numerous investigation and analysis. In the process of intuitive ontology, humans categorize objects into one of five basic categories, such as Spatial Entities, Solid Objects, Living Things, Animates, and Persons, according to the characteristic sets of Spatiality, Physicality, Biology, Animacy, Mentality, and Universals.⁴ Then, Barrett closely analyzes two expectation sets, namely Spatiality and Physicality. In the context of the final stage concerning the sense with the surrounding world, i.e. the conceptualizing of minded objects, mental activity of human beings is deeper investigated. It is suggested that some of the expectations sets might be added, reduced, or collapsed. Then, the selective activation is noted in connection with the creation of five intuitive ontological categories that were mentioned earlier.

Then, the author starts discussing ideas and beliefs of theology and religion, as well as counterintuitive concepts that are explained through the cognitive science of religion. It is suggested that these ideas have two basic ways of being counterintuitive, namely by transferring expectations between categories or by their breach. It is concluded that in theology, reflective beliefs are intended to comprise intuitive theological notions rather than counterintuitive concepts under cognitive load.

The chapter finishes with the author's considerations concerning teleology. More specifically, it is discussed how the children and adults answer different questions about making sense of things, their purposefulness and the ways they are designed. The chapter concludes that

⁴ Ibid.

in majority of cases, both children and adults give purpose-based answers to the issues about the origin of the world. Moreover, teleo-functional way of thinking is more likely to be suppressed rather than outgrown.

CHAPTER FIVE

How We Conceive of Humans

This chapter investigates the issues how the humans naturally understand other people, and how they conceptualize the fundamental properties of other humans. It starts with considerations about folk anthropology or the theory of mind and ideas of the evolutionary anthropologists. Barrett describes the basics of human theory of mind of a normal adult. The following succession of the basics is suggested, “People have conscious mental states that include beliefs, desires (wants), emotions, memories, and percepts. Action is driven by desires and modulated through percepts and beliefs. These beliefs are informed by relevant perceptual experiences. Emotional states arise through satisfaction or frustration of desires.”⁵ Then, the issues of metarepresentation and simulation are explained in order to investigate deeper the theories of mind.

Having discussed the theory of mind in nonhuman animals regarding the mental states, the author makes an observation concerning the capability of theory of mind to share thoughts about god. This discussion starts with the definition of God or gods in different religions. It is concluded that only humans have potential for collective and collaborative relationship with God.

⁵ Ibid.

While defining persons as objects and mentalistic agents, the author applies to the ideas of cognitive developmentalist Bloom while discussing mind-body dualism in children. Then, the author tries to identify persons as living beings, individuals, and moral people in the focus of non-reflective beliefs. The area of theological anthropology is suggested to exist if humans have such features as bodies, minds, spirits, souls, and morality. Further considerations concerning reflective beliefs summarize that the humans are justified in their believing. This chapter concludes that the cognitive science, investigated in the publication, does not undercut belief in souls, spirits, and conscious human minds, as well as it does not give any reasons to believe in them.

CHAPTER SIX

How We Conceive of the Divine

In this chapter, the author analyzes more directly different conceptions of the divinity and gods' conceptualization. More specifically, the observations of the ways in which humans understand other individuals are combined in this chapter to prove the naturalness of belief in gods and a super knowing, perceiving, powerful, and immortal creator, God in particular. The main argument of this chapter claims that it is possible through a cognitive scientific perspective to have explanatory and descriptive insights regarding the ways humans conceptualize the divinity and corresponding reasons. It is suggested that "Gods are common because of the operation of ordinary natural cognitive systems we use to make sense of the world and especially minded agents."⁶ The chapter continues explaining who God is and why the concepts of gods are identical in the whole world.

⁶ Ibid.

Recalling various cognitive concepts reviewed in the previous chapters, the author mentions person-based causal explanations, error management, hypersensitive agency detection of divinity (HADD) and HADD experiences. Barrett summarizes that “we seem to have a conceptual bias to see natural things in terms of their function or purpose, and have a tendency to connect this apparent purpose to the activity of someone—an intentional agent or person.”⁷ Additionally, divine thinking is explained from the viewpoint of world reasoning. Then, the idea of how dead people become gods is analyzed.

Then, the conceptual effectiveness of god concepts concerning injecting meaning into life events is investigated. The author compares believable, accessible, and discussed cosmic creator with spirits and ghosts, showing difference between them. It is concluded that spirits and ghost that are not involved in meaning-making do not belong to religion and cannot be called gods. Barrett claims, “Insofar as beliefs in the existence of gods are fairly direct, natural outcomes of ordinary human cognition, they may be regarded as justified until reasons arise to reject them.”⁸ The chapter ends with brief comments regarding cognitive explanations’ undercutting believing in God if viewed from the perspective of cognitive explanation.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cognition and Experiencing Religion

The author begins the chapter drawing attention to the correlation of cognitive appraisals and filling experiences of emotional states in terms of religious experiences. More precisely, Barrett explains how illustrative religious experiences, such as ceremonies and rituals, spirit

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

possession, petitionary prayer, and scripture reading, assist humans in understanding the religion. The chapter offers comments on the structure of experiences and discusses how conceptual information influences an experience to be religious. The author discusses emotional states and concludes that the experience cannot be simply imposed; rather some event is believed to create an experience. Moreover, to understand religious experiences completely, it is suggested to analyze the work of cognitive system as for interpreting religious images and feelings.

Then, the author analyzes the kinds of experiences, which are considered religious. It is stressed that as soon as a person views some conceptual information as the religious belief, he is likely to be guided by this perception. Barrett concludes, “That experiences deemed religious will tend to be more common when expectations are framed by prayer, meditation, or other religious practice suggests the intriguing possibility that participation in religious practices creates more opportunities to be affirmed in religious convictions, thereby reinforcing motivation and conviction in the value of such practices.”⁹ Additionally, the author notes that human mind is oriented to see the divinity in some situations, and God is really acting.

In terms of emphasizing religious practices while framing and encouraging religiously important experiences, cognitive science of religious practices is analyzed, including use of scripture, rituals, spirit possession, and prayer. Regarding hazard precaution, the author discusses the notion of hazard precaution system, which is suggested to protect humans from unseen potential harm. At the end of the chapter, Barrett concludes that frequently conducted and emotionally intensive religious practices and experiences are capable of reshaping human

⁹ Ibid.

cognition. Moreover, it can reframe humans' understanding of subsequent events leading to see the hand of God erroneously, or helping to see divine action that could have been missed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

From Natural Religion to Theology

The chapter starts with a brief summary of previous chapters and a crucial note about the author's viewing religion. Barrett claims that "Religion refers to the collection of beliefs related to the existence of one or more gods, and the activities that are motivated by these beliefs."¹⁰ Then, natural religion is closely analyzed, including its features, which are suggested to assist in explaining why humans adopt religious practices and ideas in the respective way. More specifically, the author provides the list of non-reflective beliefs or assumptions concerning natural religion. It is highlighted that sometimes natural religion can become specified and contradicted, which results in its theological explanation.

Further, theological correctness is discussed and the efforts required for teaching and maintaining theological ideas, as well as intrusion errors. Then, the notion of theological correctness and incorrectness are explained and compared. The next section argues that religion is not theology, and a religious person is not theologian or vice versa. In the context of deviating from natural religion, the notion of cultural scaffolding that makes complex theological ideas more accessible is explained. Discussing modes of religiosity, Barrett analyzes doctrinal and imagistic modes. Additionally, it is stressed that in terms of doctrinal mode of religiosity, heavy repetition of religious traditions is a crucial device for transition and maintenance of the common beliefs and practices, which causes the development of semantic memory. At the same time,

¹⁰ Ibid.

religious identities, ideas, and practices within the imagistic mode of religiosity are focused on rarely performed rites of initiations. The chapter ends with the discussion of social context and content biases.

CHAPTER NINE

Cognitive Science and Natural Theology

In this chapter, the author analyzes the connection between cognitive science and natural theology in terms of a brief sampling. This connection is explained through the discussion concerning two main ways of contact between science and theology, namely confessional natural theology and universal natural theology. It is stated that

Natural theology is the attempt to use reason, self-evident truths, and evidence from the natural world to say something about gods or the transcendent, such as to demonstrate that God exists, and to demonstrate what properties God has. On the other hand, confessional natural theology begins with some basic theological premises from a particular theological tradition already in hand, and then uses reason and insights from the naturalistic study of the world to augment, amplify, or disambiguate those theological premises.¹¹

In terms of investigating the influence of the cognitive science has on universal natural theology, it is suggested that cognitive science might be a threat to the theological claims. More specifically, cognitive findings may be troubling for religious belief if they have no connection to the external world. Then, the author discusses internal coherence of cognitive science and theism. It is noted that cognitive findings are more compatible with atheism or with theism.

¹¹ Ibid.

Additionally, Barrett analyzes science-religion debate regarding the influence of natural selection evolution on atheism. Along with evolution in natural selection, cognitive science suggests the occurrence of possible mistakes of an individual in his religious thoughts, perceptions, and judgements, which is termed error management. The author's findings conclude the relatively better coherence of natural selection, God, and reliable minds as compared to the natural selection, no-God, and reliable minds.¹² Additionally, the author continues supporting the ideas of Reid and the epistemology, claiming that cognitive science together with epistemology suggest justifying natural religion as true until the emergence of some problems connected with these beliefs.

Further, cosmological arguments, as well as teleological and religious arguments in support of the existence of God are mentioned and analyzed. The author resorts to confessional natural theology and discusses areas of contribution of cognitive science to the existing and emerging questions in theology, namely on the nature on humans, revelation, scripture, general religious teaching, and on decision-making in the religious leadership, in particular.

CONCLUSION

Being a science of mind, cognitive science allows particular understanding of human thought and behavior. More specifically, it provides insights into the nature of humans, the relationships between bodies and minds, why and how humans think, feel and experience, and how the human mind accommodates thinking about the divinity. However, for analyzed connections within cognitive science, religion, and theology, more connections can be found as a result of collaboration between cognitive scientists with religion and theology scholars in terms

¹² Ibid.

of investigating the potential of the area. Finally, further mutual collaboration and encouragement within the 'science-religion dialogue' are highly recommended for better understanding of human mind and conscience processes as well as their role in creation of religious thoughts and perceptions.

Bibliography

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