

Jeppe Sinding Jensen

# ‘Cloning Minds’: Religion between Individuals and Collectives

**Abstract:** Human nature is double – it is biological as well as cultural. The evolution of social life has depended both on the particular properties of human cognition and on cultural technologies. Among the most effective of these are norms without which there would be no humanity as we know it. The unique human mode of *normative cognition* allows humans to act, communicate, have culture and build societies along the rules, norms and values they themselves create. The hypothesis here is basically functionalist in that religion is considered a supra-individual collectivity ‘device’ that is scaffolded on the biological propensities for communal, joint, and collective activities. Religion is, in this sense, an amplification of certain traits of human nature: Humans share, they can have collective plans, intentions and activities and religious traditions repeatedly emphasize this. Thus, religious traditions ‘clone’ minds in the sense that biological differences between individuals are overridden and governed by norms of similarity and uniformity.

**Keywords:** cultural evolution, consilience in science, dual inheritance hypothesis, hybrid mind theory, imagination, collective intentionality, institutions, normative cognition, individuality, philosophy of language

Humans have evolved as a hyper-social species, one that has further created ultra-social technologies such as language, culture, and religion to assist it in all manners of its hyper-sociality. Which is the more hyper-social tool will depend on the chosen perspective; in this case, religion is the subject matter. The theoretical object, however, is somewhat different because it consists of both the evolved social cognition mechanisms and the socio-cultural technologies that jointly enable humans to develop ‘we-mode’ collective intentionality and what I shall call the socio-cultural ‘cloning’ of the mind. Among the most effective social technologies are norms, and were it not for the human ability to act according to norms, there would be no humanity as we know it. The unique human mode of *normative cognition* allows humans to act, communicate, have culture and build societies along the rules, norms and values they themselves create (Jensen 2013). The hypothesis here is basically functionalist in that religion is considered a supra-individual collectivity ‘device’ that is scaffolded on the biological propensities for communal, joint, and collective activities.

Religion is, in this sense, an amplification of certain traits of human nature. Human nature is double – it is biological and it is socio-cultural. Correspondingly, the theoretical object here is also double as the cloning of minds derives from the coupling of the biological and the socio-cultural. This is not, however, unique to religion for so do also, e.g., sports, politics and cuisines. In that sense, religion is also a case of normative cognition (Jensen 2010). Religious traditions are packed with norms for uniform behavior; members of religious groups are imagined as kin; adherents are required to imagine similar future scenarios and share emotions and thoughts. In short, religious traditions appear as coercive ways of cloning minds. Bypassing a prolix battle over definitions, I use ‘religion’ here as an abstract umbrella term for a whole suite of social, cultural and psychological phenomena. Logically then, many things can be said about religion and religions: from being systems of social power relations to existential coping management and salvific imagination programs.<sup>1</sup> Definitions of, theories about, and the debates over religion have been countless and they seem to ever increase in number (Stausberg 2009). A simple reason for this situation is that religion is so often seen ‘as’ something and then, whatever counts as relevant for that something then also counts for the view on religion. When a ‘new turn’ in theory emerges, it will influence the theoretical topography of religion by creating different perspectives. These carry with them new opportunities as well as new constraints (Rota, Mostowlansky 2015). Among the later arrivals in theories of religion are those with evolutionary and cognitive inclinations. If a scholar or scientist decides to go with any of these, she will be able to see and say things that were formerly unavailable or invisible but she will also *not* be able to continue working in previous ways. In this presentation, I shall introduce a theoretical framework that aims at taking the sciences at full value, and underline the importance of vertical integration, that is, seeing ‘the human mind as *part* of the human body rather than as its ghostly occupant’ (Slingerland 2008, 11).<sup>2</sup>

## 1 Two natures – in one mind

As noted, humans have two natures: the biological and the socio-cultural. Without the first, they would not exist and without the latter, they would not exist as human. Our heritage is dual and culture is now seen as much more influential

---

1 On the issues of what is religion and what is not, Schilbrack 2014 is mandatory.

2 The term ‘vertical integration’ was originally introduced by Barkow 1992.

than before (Richerson, Boyd 2006; Tomasello 1999). In this context I shall try to 'square the circle' – do what is not so common – namely endorse the idea of an explanatory continuum, so that informed scholarship may make the social constructionist (e.g. discourse analysis) and biological (e.g. cognitive science, psychology) 'ends meet' and so close some of the disciplinary gaps that seem to prevent interdisciplinary 'poly-logue' (Jensen 2015). In the case of religion, it is obvious that they should meet because religion is 'done' by humans that are biological creatures living in symbolic cultural niches. Anything that helps us understand those complex relationships should be welcomed. Thus, biology and the socio-cultural levels meet (somewhere) and consilience is required if we want a fuller understanding of what is going on in religious behavior (of all kinds). Briefly, the concept of 'consilience' refers to the principle that evidence from different and seemingly unrelated sources can 'converge' to robust conclusions.<sup>3</sup> Consilience is the key to richer or 'thicker' understandings of individuals in religion as well as religion in individuals.<sup>4</sup> The sociobiologist Edward Wilson noted that '[t]he strongest appeal of consilience is in the prospect of intellectual adventure and, given even modest success, the value of understanding the human condition with a higher degree of certainty' (Wilson 1999, 10). The value of consilience lies especially in the fact that '[t]he explanations of different phenomena most likely to survive are those that can be connected and proved consistent with one another' (Wilson 1999, 58). There is a direct reference to the present topic in that '[t]he mind is supremely important to the consilience program for a reason both elementary and disturbingly profound: Everything that we know and can ever know about existence is created there' (Wilson 1999, 105). A direct encouragement for the study of religion comes with Wilson's conviction on future developments: 'For centuries consilience has been the mother's milk of the natural sciences. Now it is wholly accepted by the brain sciences and evolutionary biology, the disciplines best poised to serve in turn as bridges to the social sciences and humanities' (Wilson 1999, 291).

Humans are social and cultural creatures and they show a preference for religion, too. Archaeology, anthropology and the history of religions amply demonstrate this. For millennia, the modes of the socio-cultural existence of humans were shaped in relation to religion. For the student driven by curiosity it is indeed fortunate that there is *no* shortage of data. The question is how to use the data, for which purposes and how to *make* the data (in the first instance).

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Consilience' as a general notion has a history in philosophy from William Whewell onwards, but the current use of the term was introduced by Wilson in 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Geertz 2013 is an apt example of the valuable effects of methodological consilience.

The unavoidable aspect-dependency is directly related to theory-ladenness. That in turn depends on and feeds back dialectically to the making and use of concepts and models (Jensen 2009). That is, when taking something to be an instance of 'religion', then whatever scholars theorize consciously or unconsciously will feed back into what they perceive and into what they then conceive (Jensen 2015). There is no theory-free concept of religion. Concepts, models and theories are the scholars' 'windows to the world'. This applies equally to their conceiving of the world of religion and religions. Therefore, the questions of what counts as data for what, how, and why are as relevant in their study of religion as they are anywhere else. How may they theoretically relate the examples, e.g., of the feeding of a statue of the Buddha, the sermon of a sixteenth century Protestant preacher, or the ritual seclusion of African boys in an initiation ritual? What are the common denominators that warrant generalization and comparison of 'matters religious'? In the following, I shall attempt to demonstrate how religious behaviors and institutions unambiguously build on human nature, biological as well as cultural. Religion consists of human behaviors; it is as simple as that. Thus, all other kinds of facts, constraints and functions that relate to general behaviors should deductively also apply to religious behaviors – from neurons and hormones to dreams and self-flagellation. There is in that sense nothing mysterious about religion. Scientific consilience should attest to that.

Although contemporary Western (at least) culture stresses the aspects that refer to individuals and individuality and so supports the idea of an increasing degree of individuality and individualism also in religious life, the very idea of *individual* religion is as problematic as the idea of private language or private money. Even the most individual of religious beliefs and behaviors are but variations on and of collective and social forms, simply because of the fact that religion is inherently collective and social. The view espoused here is plainly both Durkheimian and Wittgensteinian, however much they might otherwise seem to differ; the hypothesis here is that they are in deep agreement because of underlying, evolved human bio-social traits – including the socio-cultural products of humanity.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, when we wish to probe into the relations between individuals and groups in religious contexts, we may simply consult research on individual and group relations in general. Of the many different aspects that might enter the picture, the main focus here will be on the semantic, linguistic, semiotic properties of the cognitive networks in which human individuals are embedded.

---

<sup>5</sup> In their time these traits could only be surmised. More on this issue below.

These networks ultimately derive from human nature. Although religions commonly direct attention to other than human agents, religion *really* derives from and concerns the nature of humanity. In a certain sense, religion is human nature 'writ large'.<sup>6</sup> Jesse Bering offers a very plausible account of how that came about through a combination of human psychological features, acquired during human evolution (Bering 2011). Then the cultural evolution history 'took over' and the evolved psychological substrates became overlaid with ever more complex symbolic technologies (e.g. Tomasello 1999). Much later in history, these phenomena became the objects of human self-understanding – in theology, in philosophy and, lastly, in science.

To recapitulate a bit of research history: Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) explored how sacralizing human projections influence human, socio-cultural existence in indirect, reciprocal ways. He discloses how the nature of humanity is the indirect object of religion; how religious consciousness is the indirect consciousness of humanity and its self-consciousness (Feuerbach 2004 [1845]). Humans anthropomorphize their universe, create worlds and gods, and attribute human properties to it all. In this manner, he launched a naturalistic (i.e., psychological) theory about religion as based on human projection. Religion appeared as 'wishful thinking' – the dream of the human spirit. In whatever forms they may take, religious traditions require the work of the human imagination for their emergence, transmission and continuation. However, not everything goes: there are restrictions, constraints and specific bases for the projective constructions. Two very different versions of this principle can be found, one of which in Pascal Boyer's work, where the French title directly echoes Karl Marx: 'Et l'homme créa les dieux'. He insists on the work of the imagination in cognitive schemata, templates and counter-intuitive notions and ontologies (Boyer 2003). At the other end of the ideological spectrum, Jonathan Haidt points out in 'The Righteous Mind' how a set of foundations have evolved in moral psychology (Haidt 2013). These may have provided the bedrock for the development of religious moral institutions. At any rate, the epidemic of projections (the distribution of religious ideas) requires the intervention of language, which may in this case be proven the 'ultimate artifact' (Clark 1997). When Max Weber and Clifford Geertz (later) explained how humanity is suspended in 'webs of significance' it became obvious how such webs are human social constructions that are transmitted in narrative and discourse, and solidified in norms and institutions.

---

<sup>6</sup> Although the arguments and consequences presented here differ profoundly from those of Loyal Rue, he has similar ideas (Rue 2006).

## 2 Troublesome terms – with great potentials: meanings and universals

‘Meaning’ is a notoriously troublesome term in English and in relation to religion it becomes no less so (Jensen 2004). Words have meanings, so do sentences, narratives and discourses, but there is a long way from what concerns words and sentences, that is linguistic meaning, to the questions about the ‘meaning of life’. In the English language there really is little to connect the different connotations beyond the fact that the single term ‘meaning’ is used. However, as it happens, it is the practice of religious traditions to do that very thing, namely, to mediate between these levels of ‘meaning’. Religious cosmologies are composed of mythologies, narratives and discourses that put the world into language – make the world ‘speak’ so to say – as ‘religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant’ (Berger 1967, 28). Religious traditions are ‘world-making’ (Paden 1994). Throughout history, socio-cultural semantic webs have primarily consisted in religious ideologies and discourses – with authors (more or less known) from different ‘worlds’ – in the sense that gods, ancestors, prophets or reformers were often seen as the originators of speech. The terminologies of pre-modern, traditional languages are saturated by religious meanings with built-in values and norms – they are languages to ‘live by’, and so they are as they become internalized by their users. Religious traditions provide meaning on most if not all levels in cultures and societies and so they may universally be seen as ‘semantic engines’ or ‘meaning machines’. Like most other engines and machines they are invented and operated by humans.

It was Claude Lévi-Strauss’ genius to see how myths think themselves in humans without their knowledge of it. In traditional cultures, religious meanings present themselves as ‘what goes without saying’. They modulate and regulate human thought, emotion and behavior in normative cognition and so merge and unite the two natures, biological and cultural: the cultural becomes the natural and the natural becomes cultural. On the psychological level it is now common to see the human cognitive machinery as consisting of an innate fast biological system and an acquired socio-cultural system that are modulated and regulated by socio-cultural norms and institutions in complex normative cognition mechanisms (Jensen 2013). In that sense, religious traditions ‘invade’ minds as the norms and values and the terminologies and cosmologies become internalized in the members of the groups. However, this is not specific to religion; it is how all societies and cultures are reproduced. Thus, although religions consist of social facts that have some distinctive characteristics – depending on the

chosen definition of religion –, universals in religion will resemble the universals found in society and culture in general. Religions share most of their properties with other socio-cultural formations. Religions are not that unique when viewed as human phenomena. The study of religion in general and as part of something more general would disclose a range of universals that religion shares with other human and social 'facts'. Here is a list of abstract universals found in all religions:

Imagination, experience, intentionality, narrative, discourse, classification, cognitive governance, emotion regulation, action, behaviour, roles, social control, authority, institutions, power, economies, exchanges, reciprocity, sociality and world-making. *All this* goes against the idea of religion as 'a primitive notion'; that is, a notion, or a phenomenon, which cannot be broken down into constituent parts and elements (Jensen 2014, 171).<sup>7</sup>

Where is the individual when social facts such as ideologies and discourses exert massive influences over human minds? In all likelihood, the individual is right in the middle of the matrix of social facts. It is a conviction in contemporary media discourse (notably in the Western world) that the present time is more individualistic and that individualization is the key to understanding present-day social, cultural and religious forms. However, there are good reasons to suspect that individualization is precisely one more ideology-driven mode of discourse. If that is correct, individualization may then be studied (not to be exercised here) as any other social fact that has a history, as do all other social facts. One of the first to recognize an emergent individualism in European history was the art historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897). In the Middle Ages, said Burckhardt (in 1860),

[m]an was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation – only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spirited *individual*, and recognized himself as such (Burckhardt 1990, 80).

The interesting aspect of this change was that he recorded it in the shifting styles in painting, that is, the increasing degree of individualism in encoded and recorded artefacts that are objects of *collective* cognition. Individual artists were driven by collective, social and cultural tendencies – using material objects as cognitive anchors in a joint process. The individualization inspirations were

---

<sup>7</sup> Add to 'all this' also the just mentioned universals 'semantic engines' and 'meaning machines'. Unfortunately these two terms are already taken as designations – for things that are very different from the innocent sense they have here.

given shape and objectivated so that other individuals could internalize them as social facts.<sup>8</sup> This is what usually happens in the transmission of religion across time and space.

### 3 E-religion: ‘external religion’ and i-religion: ‘internal religion’

The simultaneously public and private character of religion may be conveniently designated by the terms ‘i-religion’ and ‘e-religion’ (Jensen 2014, 41–43).<sup>9</sup> Historians of religions, archaeologists, anthropologists and sociologists of religion have (mostly) studied as observable ‘e-religion’, that is, ‘external’ religion that is ‘outside-the-head’ in texts and expressed in social practices, such as rituals and institutions, and in material culture. For more than a century there has been a general consensus in the study of religion to focus on ‘e-religion’, as witnessed in most textbooks and introductions to the study of religion. When studied in texts, religious beliefs have *also* been treated as ‘e-religion’, and ‘i-religion’ has mostly remained the province of the psychology of religion. Obviously, many have attempted to bridge the gap (either way) but often this had lamentable consequences. Historians are normally not adept at psychology, nor have psychologists had the necessary insights into historical detail, cultural variations or philological skills. However, it is a sign of growing consilience that this set of problems is recognized and dealt with in theory and in method. It is apparent that it can be done, because religion, in any social manifestation, actually (by itself) bridges the gap between i-religion and e-religion. Humans have ‘hybrid minds’ with the capacity to make use of extensive cognitive networks (Donald 2001). That is what they do and studying both will only bring forth their mutual dependency. That is why it also makes sense to study beliefs in texts, because the same beliefs are replicated (more or less) in minds, and beliefs are what they are because they are products of minds. That is also why cognitive historiography is becoming ever more relevant.<sup>10</sup> Overall, it seems that religiosity was never as individualistic as the more belief-centered accounts of religious life envisaged. Nor

---

**8** Along the classic theory and explanation of ‘Externalization, objectivation and internalization’ in Berger, Luckmann 1967, 60–61.

**9** Joseph Bulbulia was (presumably) the first to transfer the distinction from linguistics to the study of religion. (See Stausberg 2009, 156).

**10** *The Journal of Cognitive Historiography* (edited by Esther Eidinow and Luther H. Martin) is a recent addition to the world of journals. See also Martin 2015.



does contemporary 'spiritualization' seem to be so, as current conceptualizations of spiritual individualization appear remarkably similar. These considerations raise the question of 'How private is the individual?' Bringing philosophy and psychology into the discussion may help clarify these issues.

## 4 Philosophical and psychological considerations on the scope of individuality

In his important essay 'The Myth of the Subjective', the philosopher Donald Davidson stated the following on subjective first-person authority and the very activity of thinking in one's own mind: '...thought is necessarily part of a common public world. Not only can others learn what we think by noting the causal dependencies that give our thoughts their content, but the very possibility of thought demands shared standards of truth and objectivity' (Davidson 2001, 52). Whichever way one wishes to think this can only be done in the words, concepts, models and perspectives that the participation in linguistic practices offer. They offer possibilities, but also constraints and restrictions. It is difficult to think of anything that does not have a name. The upshot of this is that the subjective is much more public than we habitually consider it to be. We may individually have the default impression of having private thoughts, but they depend on there being public thought. Having useable individual amounts of money in our pockets depends on the existence of a shared economy. In a similar fashion, my own thoughts are individual tokens of the shared world of thought. Another philosopher, John McDowell has cogently attacked 'the Myth of the Endogenous Given', that is, the idea that individual cognitive competence is based on innate capacities only. He wrote that:

I think we should be suspicious of the thought that we can simply credit human individuals with this equipment, without benefit of anything like my appeal to initiation into a shared language and thereby into a tradition. I think the idea that this cognitive equipment needs no such background is just another outcropping of Givenness (McDowell 1996, 185–186).<sup>11</sup>

It is difficult to imagine just what a human being would be without any such initiation into the social world and into language. Humans do not have private cultures or private languages. Ludwig Wittgenstein once explained the impossibility

---

<sup>11</sup> McDowell reiterates Wilfrid Sellar's attack on the 'myth of the given'. For an introduction to Sellar's argument, see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sellars/>

of private language in this manner: ‘The individual words of this language are to refer to what can be known only to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language’ (Wittgenstein 1973, §243). Consequently, it is ‘... also unintelligible to its originator who would be unable to establish meanings for its putative signs’ (Wittgenstein 1973, §243). Likewise, the value of a private currency would be nil. The value of having shared words, concepts, models and perspectives is that they allow for communication and so ‘make us smart’. The psychologist Michael Tomasello presented an in-depth inquiry into (as he terms them) the cultural origins of human cognition: ‘...the uniquely human forms of thinking... derive from, perhaps even are constituted by, the interactive discourse that takes place through the medium of intersubjective and perspectival linguistic symbols, constructions, and discourse patterns’ (Tomasello 1999, 215). In short, humans are like ‘fish in the water of culture’ (Tomasello 1999, 215). Now, perhaps fish do not even notice the water – but it certainly adds to the understanding of their behavior to have an appreciation for the importance of water. Humans mostly do not seem to notice culture, but it is there – it is like gravity, no one escapes it. It is probably trivial to note that the contemporary world offers more in terms of choice, liberty, and rights to individuals than ever before in the history of humanity. However, that should not lead to the conclusion that humans are ‘islands’ (note that islands have their ‘being-in-the-sea’ as a common universal property). Even in the most post-modern, post-industrial and hyper-individualist of sub-cultures it is remarkable how fads, fashions, and styles create clusters of conformity. Humans are mimetic beings.

The notions of the ‘Individual’ (and all derivations) have complex conceptual histories and sociological consequences. Contemporary Western society includes ideological constructions that are extremely individual-focused and they are most likely the products of market ideology and consumerism. Individualism is part of the ‘modern mythology’. It is through ideologies that humans are made to imagine that they really are ‘individual’, and often individual after a collective fashion. Not least political liberalism takes the individual as a natural ‘given’ – it is not. Ideologies have histories and in this case, they are long histories. Fuchs and Rüpke point out how religious individualization can be found, analyzed, explained, and understood in historical perspectives and how it is ‘not bound to a macro-theory of modernisation’ (Fuchs, Rüpke 2015). Thus, the ‘individual’ is a discursive formation: as individuals, we would not even be able to think of ourselves without shared language, shared norms and shared institutions. Paradoxically, entertaining notions about individualization may thus also be a way of ‘cloning the mind’. Just like ideologies, religious traditions also emphasize how their solutions are simply the best – for some or for all.

Therefore, they require allegiance, deference and uniformity. This leads to the main point here: how and why the mind is cloned and why religious traditions matter.

## 5 ‘Cloning the mind’

‘Cloning the mind’ involves synchronizing cognitive governance, that is, regulating the ways that humans feel, think, and act in religious traditions through ways of life, rituals, institutions, dogmas etc. – all that which regulates human life from womb to tomb. Religious traditions emphasize consistency, regularity, and uniformity – the examples are unending. Imitation is the keyword and with some exceptions, religious traditions stress equality and fairness. The Dao de Ging applies for all of being, the Ten Commandments in the Hebrew Bible hold for all the Israelites, the Qur’an emphasizes specific behaviors for Muslims, the Buddhist text on Dependent Origination explains why all humans suffer, and Inuit stories about the Angakoq (shaman) and the Sea Woman goddess stress taboo restrictions. The apex would be ‘that they may become perfectly one’ (John 17:23). The trusted functionalist story about religion as ‘social glue’ still seems to hold (along with the in-built opposite, of religion as the root of social discord and exclusion). To the characterization of religious traditions as the ‘cloning of minds’ three questions come into view: What, how, and why?

### 5.1 Question One: ‘What?’

First, the answer to the ‘what’ question is that all religious traditions (explicitly or implicitly) promote and enforce social norms and the institutions that these are embedded in. The processes of ‘making the social world’ have been instructively and convincingly demonstrated by the philosopher John Searle (Searle 2011). Norms and institutions support the networks of trust that are essential social governance instruments; society would not exist nor be able to function if there were no such networks. Briefly stated and all other things considered, religions are traditional means of affirming communities of trust, predictability, and familiarity. At a closer look, it seems that religious traditions universally have super-human agents (gods, spirits, ancestors etc.) that have ‘full strategic knowledge’, so they are able to observe and commend or punish humans. Just one example: the Inuit Sea Woman knows who has broken a taboo, which is why the wild animals do not present themselves as prey. The Shaman mediates this knowledge to the community and forces the declaration of guilt in breaking

taboos. There is thus an institutional ‘loop’ between humans, their subsistence sources, super-human ‘policing’ and knowledge, and morality. This manner of super-human ‘policing’ not only provides social information but simultaneously supports and strengthens the norms of the society and its traditions. In so doing these also provide a measure of high-level ‘predictive coding’ in that they are based on the regularity of the norms and the behaviors (in mind, body and group) that they regulate. The possibilities of predicting behaviors rest on a human propensity for regularity and doing as others do. In social psychology, this tendency is known as ‘conformity bias’. ‘Group think’ is another version of this predisposition that can be exploited in cognitive governance as ‘regulating the mind’. Cognitive governance is often achieved by producing and employing ‘standard version’ narratives that are common and perhaps tacit knowledge in a (social, cultural, religious) collective. Narratives express values and norms, emotions and actions that are relevant to the group, and they may have fundamental importance and valence in identity formation, individually or collectively (Jensen 2011). Religious narratives have ‘exogram’ functions in cognitive and semantic ‘anchoring’, that is, they are outside and between minds before and when they are internalized by individuals (Donald 2001, 308–315). They govern the flow of ideas, distribute memory and thought, guide shared learning, and justify custom and morality and – not least – they provide *meaning*. Narratives often present and contain the constituting norms and institutions with their rules and deontic powers. In other cases, the institutions are explicit and the narratives implicit and so the underlying narratives require reconstruction. At any rate, no society, from the smallest band of foragers to the Chinese empire, could endure without institutions and all that they entail. Their origin or *sine qua non* is the human capacity for normative cognition, that is, the ability of normative values and institutions to modulate and regulate thinking, feeling and acting. There can be no doubt that religion, generally and universally, ‘rides piggyback’ on evolved traits in humans. There is growing evidence from moral and evolutionary psychology that religion has evolved in and through a combination of human psychological traits (Haidt 2013; Bering 2011). This also explains why religions, despite many differences at the surface level, display underlying generalities and universals. For instance, the five ‘moral foundations’ in Jonathan Haidt’s model of moral psychology also appear as universals in religious traditions. These are all (to varying degrees) preoccupied with harm-care, justice-fairness, in- vs. out-group, hierarchy, and purity and sanctity.

## 5.2 Question Two: 'How?'

The second question, the 'how' of the cloning of minds, refers to the extended functions of the elements in the previous point, especially narratives. Religious narratives function in and as social cognition; they support and boost collective intentionality; they provide the means for collective meta-cognition and the norms for monitoring the behavior of self and others. Humans are social animals and 'we-mode' social cognition may well be considered the natural state of human collectivity. Humans are also very good at manipulating others, but they would not be able to do so if the other party did not act as the receiving end. Cheating presupposes trust. The socio-cultural scaffolding for interactions may be very diverse, some societies are more just than others, but this only proves the point about the validity and importance of narratives, norms and institutions – they may provide conventions with such an aura of factuality that they seem natural to whoever lives by them. That is how narratives integrate individuals into themselves. We learn to understand ourselves through stories about others and through 'cultural life scripts' – inherent in religious narratives (Nelson 2006). This is why storytelling is so fundamentally important in all the world's cultures. Religious narratives and life scripts provide the 'forward biographies' of members of the interpretive community as they present examples of behavior. Myths, legends and hagiographies of all kinds make up the cultural life script for adherents – for the do's and the don'ts of the society and not only so in literate traditions.<sup>12</sup> Only seemingly are religious narratives about superhuman agents – they are really about humans, for humans and by humans (this was Feuerbach's original insight). Religious narratives tell humans who they are: not only individually, but collectively as well.

Narratives integrate groups. They set up cognitive ecologies, provide common values, motivate action co-ordination, govern social institutions, regulate intentionality and emotions – and deliver the means for mind control. In order to move beyond any individual's perceptions, communication, language and narrative (in all forms and modes) are needed to 'mediate' and that is how the narratives function as tools for cognition: they provide means for knowing what is in 'other minds'.<sup>13</sup> The psychologist Jerome Bruner (in 'The Transactional Self') famously noted that '... our sensitivity to narrative provides the major link between our own sense of self and our sense of others in the social

---

<sup>12</sup> For examples of myths in non-literate societies, see Jensen 2009a, e.g. the contributions by Pierre Clastres and Edwin Hutchins.

<sup>13</sup> Include here body-language, mime, material objects – anything that may be attributed, and convey, meaning.

world around us' (Bruner 1986, 69). He is seconded on this point by the neuro-psychologist Merlin Donald: 'Narratives are a very sophisticated means of constructing wider representations of intricate and abstract social events... the capacity to construct narratives is linked to the capture of long and intricate social events' (Donald 2012, 44). In this sense, narratives are a way of 'slowing down' the work of the brain and thus enabling the communicative functions. In religious narratives, humans are able to construct representations of intricate relations to and interactions with superhuman agents: uniting living and dead, human and super-human in a single, complex fictional space.<sup>14</sup> In this manner it becomes understandable, how i- and e-religion abstract objects, such as values, norms, ideas and representations of super-human agents may become manifested in material objects and all things that can be *narrativized*, that is, talked about and attributed meaning. Any human being who is a member of a society is thus plunged into the seas of meaning. In this case, the seas of religious meaning are the primary object. Although no one knows for just how long, there is no doubt that these 'seas' have been with humans for a very long time. It is obvious that social communication and other forms of exchange have greatly facilitated cooperation and human social life in general.<sup>15</sup> This relates, again to the accepted functionalist views of religion as social glue and complexity reduction. Needless to say (but here it is), in-group solidarity may well breed and feed on out-group hostility as well as the detection of in-group free-riders and defectors (e.g. Boyer 2001, 265–296).

### 5.3 Question Three: 'Why?'

Turning to the third question, the 'why?', it must be noted that another dimension has surfaced in research in recent years: one that adds important facts to the understanding of that question. It has become clear that the predictive potential of the human brain is key and that 'predictive codings' are the default processes. The brain is constantly predicting and aligning; it is 'pattern-seeking' and trying to make sense of sensory inputs. The brain is not just recording, but also actively trying to figure out 'what next'.<sup>16</sup> It turns out that the human cognitive

---

**14** An example: Ed Hutchins' analysis of the living Trobriand Islanders and their relations to the mental states of the Baloma spirits (in Jensen 2009a, 337–357).

**15** 'Costly signaling theory' has provided clues for an understanding of how such communication works; see e.g. Bulbulia 2013 for a concise overview.

**16** There is a growing body of technical literature on this topic, but see the article by the philosopher Andy Clark (Clark 2013) for an overview.

machinery extensively provides expectations and predictions to which the sensory input is matched, modulated, and perhaps corrected in accordance with existing knowledge. This knowledge can (and often does) consist of social and cultural conventions that furnish multi-level downward predictions, as in the form of 'Oh, this is what we habitually consider sacred' (or clean etc.), and respond accordingly. Therefore, the contents of religious traditions may serve as means for high-level predictive coding. In the collectivist theoretical paradigm endorsed here, this also means that when the individuals who belong to a particular tradition or interpretive community internalize the prevalent norms and values they also acquire predictive 'tools'. Religious traditions contain norms and values that are already encoded; cosmologies and classification systems are often totalizing ideologies, which influence all that comes under their sacred canopies. On the other hand, there are also benefits as the resulting uniformity and congruence help individuals and groups predict, monitor, and understand the behaviors of self and others. Seen in this perspective, religious traditions prove their worth as 'prediction-machines' with the potentials for complexity reduction: knowing that others share the same codes can be helpful (from imagining ancestors to affect regulation). These functions also benefit the individual and increase its social fitness and value as a group-member. Coalitional psychology and conformity bias go a long way to explain why group adherence is so strong in humans. The study of religion (and culture in general) then furnish higher-level explanations of *how* groups and individuals behave.

Religions are and provide social facts *between* minds – in norms, values, and institutions that stabilize communication even when mediated across time (through generations) and space (geographical distribution). Holy scriptures, rituals, and institutions allow for distributed cognition that enables collective action with others *not* present: 'we' may imitate, attempt to think, feel, and act like a holy person of somewhere else and some other time. Humans do 'tune in' to one another; it is part of their nature to do so.<sup>17</sup> Social and cultural institutions support these functions in cognitive and behavioral alignment (Jensen 2015). Religions are very much about imitation. Imitation, or *mimesis*, is the default mode of human learning. Without it, there would be no human culture, no accumulation of ideas and skills. Thus, imitation is the backbone of religious

---

<sup>17</sup> The story about 'mirror neurons' has become ever more complex. There is no doubt that they are necessary in an explanation of the bases of human social behavior (Rizzolatti, Sinagaglia 2008). Questions remain as to just how important they are and what else is involved in human co-operation (Hickok 2014).

practice, or inversely and somewhat sacrilegiously, religious ideologies' practices shape the sanctification of mimesis.<sup>18</sup>

Even the most individualizing (religious) behaviors are deeply social and collective – not least for their interpretation *as*, e.g., religious.<sup>19</sup> Even the most drastic and rebellious reformers need to use the previous terminologies of their interpretive communities: Buddha, Jesus, Fidel Castro.... Humans depend on their relations to others in order to create meaning in the first place. Religious traditions strive to stabilize meanings as results of interpreting their 'ultimate sacred postulates' (Rappaport 1999, 277–312). The danger of conflict is then elevated to the sphere of that which is 'set apart and forbidden' as in Émile Durkheim's famous definition of religion as a 'moral community'.

Religions traditions encourage humans to think, feel, and act in unison (which they then do more or less). When so doing, religious traditions do not impose anything new or different to human nature, as noted above on the mimetic nature of religious behavior. Religion is in that sense *natural* – as an extension or amplification of the human propensity to act with others. This is one more reason why it is easy to be religious and much easier than doing science.<sup>20</sup> When Pascal Boyer published *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion* in 1994, it was a milestone in the development of scientific thought about religion. On a more modest scale, I shall suggest here that the 'cloning of minds' to a large degree results from the naturalness of religious *behavior*. However, it should be noted that this idea would not emerge nor be supported were it not for the confluence of scientific and scholarly inspirations, data, and evidence from a whole range of different fields and disciplines that work with phenomena on many separate levels. Previously, it was common to consider higher-level phenomena, e.g. 'culture', as devoid of causality at lower levels, e.g. biology, but this persuasion has been challenged (e.g. Tomasello 1999; Boyd, Richerson 2006; Clark 2013). There is no reason why 'culture' – and thus 'religion' – could not be both caused and causal (Plotkin 2003, 104–105). So-called 'downward causation' is a probable effect and so social and cultural phenomena may well be responsible for functions in lower-level mechanisms. Cognition is causal in relation to culture but culture is also causal in relation to cognition (Jensen 2002). Remember that culture is not a thing, but a term

---

**18** The capacity for mimesis is the basis for human cultural evolution as demonstrated in Merlin Donald's extensive theory of the evolution of human consciousness (Donald 2001).

**19** Hyper-individual pathological behavior excluded.

**20** See Robert N. McCauley on this issue (McCauley 2013).



that denotes a whole range of psychological and social processes.<sup>21</sup> To state it briefly: something as 'ethereal' as religion may be very much involved in the behavioral patterns of individuals and (thus also) groups. If and when religious traditions regulate emotions in particular rituals, they also regulate the hormonal responses in the same individuals.

## 6 Conclusion

Religion is about more than belief. On the 'cloning of minds' hypothesis, religious traditions and all that they involve are also about bodies, emotions, and coalitions, and among other things, belong to an inclusive science of religion. 'Inclusive' because it accepts as many levels of description as are necessary for the given task. Here, the task was to describe and explain how religion functions between individual minds so as to make up corporate social bodies and how the ensuing 'cloning of minds' posits religion as a socio-cultural superstructure that has its roots in human biology and thus psychology. A clear example of this principle is provided by the developmental psychologist Daniel Siegel in his program for an 'interpersonal neurobiology', that is, how humans are connected as products of their brains and their relationships. Siegel states that: '...human connections shape neural connections, and each contributes to mind. Relationships and neural linkages together shape the mind. It is more than the sum of its parts; this is the essence of emergence' (Siegel 2012, 3). Thus, studying the individual helps to understand the social – and vice versa. Biologically, humans are individuals – but culturally they are not. They are much more 'cloned' than they would ever imagine from a first-person perspective. Anyone who has 'grown a baby' will know this: socialization is really about 'tuning in' until the cultural becomes so natural that it could not have been otherwise. 'Consilience' is the catchword for future research on such issues because scientifically the world of humans is a highly complex theoretical object. The study of religion – in its many varieties – demonstrates this more clearly than do many other fields of study.

---

**21** 'Cultural priors' is the technical term for the socially induced expectations that individuals (and groups) have. They build on previous experiences and are responsible for the subsequent processing of perception. In terms of religious traditions, such priors may determine, for instance, how various foodstuffs are perceived and evaluated.

## Bibliography

- Barkow, Jerome H. 1992. 'Beneath new culture is old psychology: Gossip and social stratification'. In *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*, eds. Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, John Tooby. New York. 627–637.
- Berger, Peter L. 1967. *The Sacred Canopy. Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York.
- Berger, Peter L.; Luckmann, Thomas 1967. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York.
- Bering, Jesse 2011. *The Belief Instinct. The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life*. New York.
- Boyer, Pascal 1994. *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion*. Berkeley.
- Boyer, Pascal 2001. *Religion Explained. The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. New York.
- Boyer, Pascal 2003. *Et l'homme créa les dieux*. Paris. (French trans. of *Religion Explained*. New York 2001).
- Bruner, Jerome 1986. *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, MA.
- Bulbulia, Joseph 2013. 'Why "costly signalling" models of religion require cognitive psychology.' In *Origins of Religion, Cognition and Culture*, ed. Armin W. Geertz. London. 71–81.
- Burckhardt, Jacob 1990 [1860]. *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*. (rpd. in Penguin Classics as *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. London 1990)
- Clark, Andy 1997. *Being There: Putting Brain, Body, and World Together Again*. Cambridge, MA.
- Clark, Andy 2013. 'Whatever next? Predictive brains, situated agents, and the future of cognitive science', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 36. 181–253.
- Davidson, Donald 2001. *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. Oxford.
- Donald, Merlin 2001. *A Mind So Rare. The Evolution of Human Consciousness*. New York.
- Donald, Merlin 2012. 'Commentary on Cowley's chapter.' *Interaction Studies* 13:1. 41–49
- Feuerbach, Ludwig 2004 [1845]. *The Essence of Religion*. Prometheus Books. Amherst, NY.
- Fuchs, Martin; Rüpke, Jörg. 2015. 'Religious individualization in historical perspective', *Religion* 45.3. 323–329.
- Geertz, Armin W. 2013. 'Whence Religion? How the brain constructs the world and what this might tell us about the origins of religion, cognition and culture.' In *Origins of Religion, Cognition and Culture*, ed. Armin W. Geertz. London. 17–70.
- Haidt, Jonathan 2013. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. London.
- Hickok, Gregory 2014. *The Myth of Mirror Neurons. The Real Neuroscience of Communication and Cognition*. New York.
- Jensen, Jeppe Sinding 2002. 'The Complex Worlds of Religion: Connecting Cultural and Cognitive Analysis'. In *Current Approaches in the Cognitive Science of Religion*, eds. Ilkka Pyysiäinen, Veikko Anttonen. London. 203–228.
- Jensen, Jeppe Sinding 2004. 'Meaning and Religion. On Semantics in the Study of Religion.' In *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*. Vol. 1, eds. Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz, Randi Warne. Berlin. 219–252.
- Jensen, Jeppe Sinding 2009. 'Conceptual Models in the Study of Religion'. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Peter B. Clarke. Oxford. 245–262.
- Jensen, Jeppe Sinding (ed.) 2009a. *Myths and Mythologies. A Reader*. London.
- Jensen, Jeppe Sinding 2010. 'Doing it the Other Way Round: Religion as a Basic Case of "Normative Cognition"', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22. 314–321.

- Jensen, Jeppe Sinding 2011. 'Framing Religious Narrative, Cognition and Culture Theoretically.' In *Religious Narrative, Cognition and Culture*, eds. Armin W. Geertz, Jeppe Sinding Jensen. London. 31–50.
- Jensen, Jeppe Sinding 2013. 'Normative Cognition in Culture and Religion', *Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion* 1.1. 47–70.
- Jensen, Jeppe Sinding 2014. *What is Religion?* London.
- Jensen, Jeppe Sinding 2015. 'Closing the Gaps. Some Notes on the *Making of Perspectives*', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 27. 1–13.
- Jensen, Jeppe Sinding 2015a. 'How Institutions Work in Shared Intentionality and We-Mode Social Cognition', *Topoi. An International Review of Philosophy* 35(1). 301–312.
- Martin, Luther H. 2015. *The Mind of Mithraists. Historical and Cognitive Studies in the Roman Cult of Mithras*. London.
- McCauley, Robert N. 2013. *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not*. New York.
- McDowell, John 1996. *Mind and World*. Cambridge, MA.
- Nelson, Katherine (ed.) 2006. *Narratives from the Crib*. Cambridge, MA.
- Paden, William E. 1994. *Religious Worlds*. Boston
- Plotkin, Henry 2003. *The Imagined World Made Real. Towards a Natural Science of Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ.
- Rappaport, Roy 1999. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humankind*. Cambridge.
- Richerson, Peter, J.; Boyd, Robert 2006. *Not by Genes Alone. How Culture Transformed Human Evolution*. Chicago.
- Rizzolatti, Giacomo; Sinagaglia, Corrado 2008. *Mirrors in the Brain. How Our Minds Share Actions and Emotions*. Oxford.
- Rota, Andrea; Mostowlansky, Till 2015. 'A Matter of Perspective?' *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 28.2. (online advance).
- Rue, Loyal 2006. *Religion is Not About God: How Spiritual Traditions Nurture Our Biological Nature and What to Expect When They Fail*. New Brunswick, NJ.
- Schilbrack, Kevin 2014. *Philosophy and the Study of Religion. A Manifesto*. Chichester, UK.
- Searle, John R. 2011. *Making the Social World. The Structure of Human Civilization*. Oxford.
- Siegel, Daniel J. 2012. *The Developing Mind. How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*. New York
- Slingerland, Edward 2008. *What Science Offers the Humanities. Integrating Body and Culture*. Cambridge.
- Stausberg, Michael (ed.) 2009. *Contemporary Theories of Religion*. London.
- Tomasello, Michael 1999. *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*. Cambridge, MA.
- Wilson, Edward O. 1999. *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. New York
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1973. *Philosophical Investigations*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York.

### Jeppe Sinding Jensen

School of Culture and Society – Department of the Study of Religion  
 Aarhus University  
 Jens Chr. Skous Vej 3  
 8000 Aarhus C  
 Denmark  
 jsj@cas.au.dk

