

Emma Cohen and Nicola Knight report:

At the 107th meeting of the American Anthropological Association held last week in San Francisco, we chaired a panel titled 'Religion, Anthropology, and Cognitive Science', co-sponsored by the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness and the Society for the Anthropology of Religion. The session comprised five papers and plenty of time for discussion.

In the last decade, there has been a rapid expansion of scholarship dealing with fundamental questions about religious belief and practice from a cognitive scientific viewpoint. The main aim of the panel was to bring together anthropologists who are applying methodological tools from the cognitive sciences in order to address long-standing questions about recurrent and variable features of religion. Together, the contributions demonstrated that a committed and non-parochial approach to collaboration across the cognitive science disciplines, that includes the borrowing of methodological tools and epistemological principles, enables us to revisit and reframe foundational questions about religion and to propose well-grounded new answers. In addition, we hoped to draw new blood into the CSR field and fire up the kind of interest among fellow anthropologists that might lead to hands-on engagement (perhaps facilitated by the Summer 2009 workshop organized within Oxford's Cognition, Religion, and Theology Project).

We were very pleased that a large number of people attended the whole session (in spite of the very early morning slot), with standing room only. Here are the summaries of the papers:

Harvey Whitehouse (Head of the School of Anthropology, University of Oxford) reported on a large interdisciplinary project funded by the European Commission entitled 'Explaining Religion' (EXREL), recently launched at the Centre for Anthropology and Mind at the University of Oxford. Part of the focus of EXREL is on features of religious thinking and behaviour that are cross-culturally recurrent, apparently rooted in our species' evolutionary history. But EXREL is also seeking to investigate those religious concepts, or networks of concepts, that require considerable cognitive, social, and technological resources to create, remember, and pass on. Whitehouse further discussed the wider implications of the explanatory approach typified by EXREL for socio-cultural anthropology, with particular reference to the needs for systematizing ethnographic data gathering and use and for an open and eclectic approach to methodology. Rita Astuti (Reader in Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science) reported the results of experimental studies carried out among Vevo adults in Madagascar, designed to elicit people's beliefs in the afterlife which had previously been documented ethnographically. This research revealed that adults' representations of the afterlife vary significantly depending on the context in which they were asked to reason about the consequences of death. Thus, while adults reason that the spirit of the deceased survives after death in the context of a narrative that primes them to think about the ancestors, they reason that all properties of the person, bodily as well as sensory, mental and emotional, will cease after death in the context of a narrative that primes them to think about the corpse of the deceased. The findings' implications for classic anthropological debates on the nature of belief were also discussed. Stewart Guthrie (Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, Fordham University) focused on the universality of belief in spiritual beings. He argued that their key features – mind, purpose, and symbolic communication – are central to our concepts of humans and hence of intentional agents generally. We readily attribute these features to the world at large, because interpretation of that world is uncertain and hence a bet; because we bet first on the possibilities that matter most; and because what matters most is humanlike qualities. Betting on them is invaluable when we are right, and relatively harmless when wrong. We therefore chronically anthropomorphize the world, finding gods, punishments, and messages in natural phenomena. Critics of this argument counter that, whereas biological humans are visible and tangible, spirits often are not, and thus are importantly

un-humanlike. An answer to this critique comes from recent evidence, provided by multiple disciplines including linguistics, philosophy, and especially psychology, that humans intuitively are mind-body dualists. In this dualism, mind has both independence and priority. If so, then a conception of mind as disembodied is our default position, and our notions of spiritual beings actually are our core conceptions of ourselves and our fellow humans. Jonathan Lanman (DPhil candidate, Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology, University of Oxford) addressed the question: "if religious beliefs are so well supported by universal cognitive biases, whence secularization and non-theism?" While secularization hypotheses have roots in Marx, Durkheim, and Weber and have been discussed by numerous sociologists and religious studies scholars in the second half of the 20th century, little progress has been made in their evaluation. Lanman argued that a cognitive approach can help answer the specific question of whether or not particular socio-cultural environments cause decreased levels of religious belief. Drawing from his recent research, he claimed that particular socio-cultural environmental factors (e.g., presence and impact of a welfare-state system) do indeed lower levels of religious belief. Maurice Bloch (Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science) proposed a novel framing of the cognitive study of 'religion'. He argued that the subject needs to be approached in wider terms than is customary: what needs to be explained is the nature of human sociability, and then religion simply appears as an aspect of this that cannot stand alone. The cognitive study of religion could therefore be linked to a reflection on the significance of uniquely human behaviours rooted in the imaginary element in human social relations in general.