

*The Cognitive Science of Religion* by James A Van Slyke. Ashgate 2011. Ashgate Science and Religion Series. 196pp., 3 b&w illustrations, hb., £65.00. ISBN-13: 9781409421238.

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I share a great many of the same theoretical sympathies as van Slyke. In fact, we use many of the very same arguments in our critique of the cognitive science of religion, such as making appeal to the notions of emergence, top-down causation, complexity, dynamical systems, emotions, and more. I use these concepts because I think religion is a complex human phenomenon that must be explained on many levels, going against what Carl Craver (2007) calls “explanatory fundamentalism” and instead opting for his “mosaic unity of neuroscience.” James van Slyke also thinks religion must be explained on many levels, but argues for an additional level, which he calls “theology” (88). As far as I see it, he invokes two major arguments. Theology “functions” “like” a scientific theory by organizing a “vast number of events” and “a large set of multiple forms of information (i.e. experiences, history, scripture, tradition) into a meaningful whole” (89). The second argument is more difficult. Van Slyke thinks religion can be explained by appeal to a transcendent reality (28), which he thinks is the “top” level. In other words, he thinks one explanation of religion is that there really are supernatural agents existing in a transcendent reality (26). From my perspective, what this amounts to is using concepts from the study of dynamical and emergent systems to blur the line between science and theology from apologetic purposes.

A better title for the book might be “Cognitive Theology,” or “Cognitive Apologetics,” for Van Slyke is arguing at core (at least in the early part of the book) that theology should be taken into consideration when trying to explain religion. His argument works through a series of conflation.

There are at least two types of anti-reductionist scholarship in the study of religion. One type argues that when religious language and action are reduced to other explanatory levels we are no longer talking about religion, so the reduction fails as a true form of explanation. In other words, religion as a phenomenon must be understood primarily at the level of semantics and folk psychology. I say “primarily” because religion can just as easily be defined in such a way that

it can be reduced to other levels of explanation. In that case we would have to judge between the definitions and, if need be, try to make the case that religious semantics should be integral to any definition of religion. The other type of anti-reductionist scholarship in the study of religion is related to the phenomenological critique of science, which finds that human experience has qualities that cannot be reduced and translated into scientific language (which is public and third-person) without losing something essential about them.

In other words, we have semantic anti-reductionism and ontological anti-reductionism. Van Slyke's version of anti-reductionism conflates these two forms with an *additional* argument that there is something essential to *religious* experience that makes it even more problematic to "reduce." In the version of this argument I see van Slyke defending, religious experience is experienced in the way it is because *there is in fact* a transcendent reality to which human beings make appeal. Following Haught, van Slyke does not think we can "dispense completely with ideas of God, revelation, and the sacred when trying to explain why people are religious" (2). These things (God, revelation, and the sacred) amount to a "theological explanation of religious belief" (21).

So this is the first major conflation in van Slyke's argument. The second conflates that noted transcendent reality with what scholars in the human sciences defend in the concepts of emergence, top-down causation, complexity, and dynamical systems. Philosophers of cognitive science use these concepts, many of which are derived from mathematics, to explain self-organizing systems that are complex and dynamic. Emergence and top-down causation are closely related; the idea is that systems have varying properties at different levels. In human beings, we can describe the goings-on at the level of neurons firing, but we can also describe what is going on at the level of psychology, as well as at the level of social dynamics. Systems generate new levels, and these are said to "emerge." Some of us think these levels can be reconciled, translated, and unified (consilience). Others think some properties described at these levels are fundamentally different, so complete consilience cannot take place.

How "high" can we go? Van Slyke argues that the transcendent (or "metaphysical") level studied by theologians should be placed at the highest level. One clue as to why van Slyke may think this is because he thinks metaphysical propositions such as "the existence of supernatural beings... cannot be answered by any one level in the hierarchy of science" (24–25). The transcendent level is thus some strange, mysterious mix of levels, one that somehow belongs to the "hierarchy of science" while at the same time being outside of it (since science is not metaphysics, according to van Slyke). Since we generally think of gods as transcendent, as "above" us, it is easy to make such a conflation, however, there

is no argument given that justifies it.

Third, the point about theology at the top of the hierarchy of science relies on another conflation, that between metaphysics and theology. Van Slyke puts his cards on the table when he argues that there is a “lack of discrimination” in the standard model of CSR between scientific and metaphysical statements (5). By metaphysical statements, van Slyke means “propositions about the existence or non-existence of gods.” As noted, Van Slyke assumes, without justifying it, that theologians are experts in metaphysics and can offer a “competing perspective on the interpretation of findings from the cognitive science of religion.”

Van Slyke cites Murphy and Ellis’s argument that one of these (metaphysics or theology) is “needed to top-off the hierarchy of the science” (29). In a kind of bastardization of Gödel we get the idea that this is needed because questions arise which cannot be answered within sciences themselves. Even if we accept the fact that metaphysical questions precede scientific ones (as most pragmatists would also claim), this does not mean 1) that metaphysics and theology are the same, nor 2) that this is a problem for science. If we are saying that science cannot account for metaphysics, then why does van Slyke want science to do so? This is not so much a critique of science as a plea for philosophers (and theologians as far as they can) to offer better metaphysics. Van Slyke gives no reason to think that theological accounts of metaphysics offer the best alternative.

Another point of conflation concerns one of the fundamental premises of the book between an emergence account and an adaptationist account. Van Slyke assumes that a by-product explanation of religion and an emergent-dynamic account of religion are mutually exclusive. He does not really say why. I have serious doubts that they are mutually exclusive. He can probably get away with this because he does not define religion.

The last conflation is between religious studies and theology. These disciplines are different. They have different aims and motivations. Even though the motivations behind van Slyke’s type of argumentation and those of religious studies as a humanistic discipline are different, I am not sure how much the difference in motives actually matters. If van Slyke calls universe-level complex self-organizing systems “divinity” or “God” but does not accord that system human-like intentionality, there is perhaps not that much difference between us. The big problem is conflating this self-organizing system with the superhuman agents talked about in the myths and rituals of everyday religion, conflating cultural and semantic levels of explanation with “theological” levels (perfectly summed up in the slash “religion/theological studies” on page 2). He allies religious studies and theology in the same project, arguing that religious studies *or* theology offer “higher level descriptions” and that this level will offer a “real

explanation.” However, we should be very careful, religious studies is different than theology.

Now we are back to the question, why call this science? I see a lot of value in smart, compassionate people using “the biblical message, the theological heritage of the church, and the thought forms of the historical cultural context in which the contemporary people of God seek to speak, live, and act” (89, quotation from Grenz) to think with and offer “meaningful wholes.” I also see value in using other theological traditions besides Christianity in this way.

However, I see no good reason to claim that doing this is the cognitive science of religion or offers a real challenge to the cognitive science of religion. I think the van Slyke’s of the world would be better off giving up the idea that this is science. Why the need to call it science or to compete with science? What theologians do is more like the humanities, with the addition and in light of certain special forms of fiction (religion).

In spite of all this criticism, I thoroughly enjoyed van Slyke’s book. I applaud any attempt to give alternative accounts of religion that take seriously the cognitive science of religion. The book is filled with good, important ideas, and is a useful summary of the cognitive science of religion. I also think it serves the purpose he hopes for in his Postscript to “contribute to discussion and debate within the cognitive science of religion, as well as the larger religious studies and theological community” (155). In *The Tempest*, the jester Trinculo must seek shelter from a storm in the bed and clothing of the strange islander Caliban. The misery of explanatory fundamentalism and naïve reductionism makes us strange bedfellows indeed, for where we do agree is in the recognition that broad levels of meaning (by which I mean the semantics of religion) must be taken into consideration when accounting for religion. However, if van Slyke maintains he is offering a revision of science (or CSR), I haven’t seen any reason to think theology offers anything beyond the human sciences. I don’t get a sense from the book what anything beyond it would look like.

### References

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