

3. The Cognitive Anthropology of Religion

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1. Cognitive Science and the Anthropology of Religion: major theories

1. Why are **ideas about the supernatural** so widespread? (Boyer – see below)
2. **Agent concepts** trigger HADD and ToMM (Guthrie, Barrett – see below)
3. Why is there **ritual**? Ritual practices survive because they match the **input conditions** of the **Hazard-Precaution Device** (Boyer and Liénard 2006)
4. The **‘divergent modes theory’**: Why are some religions based on **doctrine, authority and routine**, others on **charisma and emotion**? The two modes of religiosity exploit **two kinds of memory: semantic and episodic**. (Whitehouse)
5. The **ritual form hypothesis**: Why are some rituals performed often, others rarely? Intuitive constraints on ritual form determine this and other variables in ritual practice. (MacCauley and Lawson)

2. Explaining Religion: Supernatural Beings I (esp. Boyer)

1. A recurrent part of religions is **apparently irrational belief in supernatural beings**
2. Any **explanation must begin with the nature of the mind** in which these ideas flourish
3. The mind is made up of **modules** that give us an **innate ontology** and **non-reflective beliefs**
4. Ideas about the supernatural may be **catchy** because they **break a small number of basic ontological assumptions** (salient) while conforming enough to expectations to provide a **rich inferential potential** (relevant and memorable).
5. These are **Minimally Counter-Intuitive (MCI) concepts**

3. Explaining Religion: Supernatural Beings II (Guthrie, Barrett)

1. Among MCI concepts, **agents concepts** are **particularly ‘catchy’**
2. This is because we have a **HADD (Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device)** and a very **elaborate ToMM (Theory of Mind Module)**!
3. **Hypersensitivity to the presence of agents** (predators and prey) is **adaptive** in an environment in which false positives cost little and false negatives are very costly, so the HADD disposes us to see an agent behind every bump in the night or face in the clouds.
4. In the EEA, the most important information was **social**; an elaborate **ToMM** is therefore **adaptive**.
5. **Agent concepts** are made **salient** by the hypersensitivity of the HADD and are offer **rich inferential possibilities** because they fit the inputs of the ToMM. QED.

4. Critiques of Cognitive Anthropology

1. Moral
2. Scientific/philosophical
3. Anthropological

Handouts, presentations and reading lists for these lectures are available to download from