

**Geertz, Armin W. and Jeppe Sinding Jensen (eds.). 2011. *Religious Narrative, Cognition and Culture: Image and Word in the Mind of Narrative*. Sheffield: Equinox. 336 pp. Pb.: \$24.99. ISBN: 9781845532956.**

This is a comprehensive work bringing together scholars from various disciplines – anthropology, linguistics, psychology and religious studies – to reflect on what essentially may be termed basic human questions about self, mind, brain and being human, i.e. having the capacity to reflect, to symbolise and (most importantly) to construct narratives, engage in dialogues and be able to imaginatively visualise things that may be referred to as “counterintuitive”. As human beings, we have brains that can cognitively interpret and understand a world that is not material, but constructed by us and also made meaningful by us.

The emphasis throughout this book attempts to cover a wide range of narratives from the *Biblical Exodus* to the *Mahabharata*, *The Satanic Verses* of Rushdie to the creation of life history myths by astrology and supernatural beings in the virtual world; it is on the social world and the need for communicating with others that is seen as an integral part of evolving to be human. The interface of the brain with the social world is seen, for example, as “outside in” rather than “inside out”. In other words, rather than the brain being a machine/robotic mechanism, it is now increasingly seen as something that has developed in response to the fact of being social, in relation to others rather than in inward isolation. Thus, the brain is recognised as remaining plastic almost throughout a person’s life, especially if the external environment is continuously changing.

Such is the importance of the environment, to be conceptualised in social, symbolic, semiotic and cultural terms that a changing environment can keep the process of socialisation running throughout a person’s life, raising questions about the relationship of self and society. Changing narratives continue to reinvent the sense of self and personhood, and anchorage may be found in myths of religion, astrology or even virtual life worlds.

As pointed out by Merlin Donald in this volume, the human brain developed the ability of conscious thinking specifically by being liberated from its biological memory limitations. In other words, to be human is to be able to transcend the biological to be able to develop a cognitive world based on collective thought enabled by culture and social living. Literacy, for example, plays a key role in changing the cognitive capacity of the brain. By storing knowledge outside of human memory, the entire process of knowing becomes liberated from authoritative control and finds free expression. Thus, as Chris Sinha points out, writing introduces a person to abstract cognitive attitudes and rather than depending on an authoritative source, as when knowledge is oral; it becomes centred in a neutral text that frees the individual learner to think independently. The externalisation of memory and the use of various technologies for storage have had serious implications for human development.

The major focus of the book is on religion, however, and how religious narratives become powerful vehicles for the cognitive development of self, culture and human society. The very ability for narrative construction comes to a human child early in life, primarily as a result of socialisation through interaction with others who tell stories. This storytelling enables the creation of sense of continuity and helps a child to develop of sense of self in

relation to others and ultimately a sense of connectedness and continuity not only with one's own life history, but with a social and even global history. Such a sense of continuity builds up in humans a sense of being part of a larger whole, a sense of purpose and being that is both transcendental and adaptive; religious narratives in particular do so by their need fulfilment and sense of collective self.

Evolutionary biology and linguistics provide a basic theoretical framework for the majority of papers in this volume, but several focus on purely cultural theory as it relates to religion. From Durkheim and Marcel Mauss on one hand, to the "hard science" of neurotransmitters of the brain on the other, the theoretical tools used by the scholars are varied. Yet most come to the similar conclusions, that the human mind is not to be understood in terms of engineering but as something transcendental and free from mechanical constraints.

The evolutionary adaptations of humans have not been to use their already-developed organs for forming culture and society, but rather it is the need to be in society that has been the adaptive mechanism; to fulfil this requirement, other aspects (such as brain and language) have developed in the way they have. The ultimate lesson to be learnt is that we are humans because of our human qualities of communication, empathy and cooperation and sharing. An fascinating experiment done on the neurotransmitters of the brain indicates, for example, that the brain shows signs of well-being and harmony when a person takes a decision that is cooperative and in adjustment to fellow beings rather than being competitive. The message is clear: it is an evolutionary advantage to be harmonious and social rather than being individualistic and competitive. In other words, humans have evolved to be sociable, and religion is one way in which this collective mind is achieved.

This book makes for heavy but engrossing reading. Every chapter (18 in all) is specialised and makes use of a different kind of theory, and it is intriguing to note that varieties of approach lead to more or less similar conclusions. It is not meant for lay readers and is mostly suitable for a serious researcher and senior scholar. Nevertheless, it has much to offer to a person seriously considering questions regarding what is it to be human, both in a social and psychological sense. What is the self, what is consciousness, and what is the direction of human development for the future? It stimulates intellectual curiosity and attempts, at the same time, to answer a variety of questions that often come to us reflectively and speculatively.

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