CHAPTER NINE

TOWARDS AN INTEGRATION OF ETHNOGRAPHY, HISTORY AND THE COGNITIVE SCIENCE OF RELIGION

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Scientific explanations and interpretive accounts of human behaviour, including religious behaviour, are different kinds of enterprise. It is tempting to think that although the questions asked by both scientists and humanist scholars look similar, they are actually incommensurate. Hilary Putnam’s professor, caught with his trousers down in the girls’ dormitory, may serve as an instructive illustration (Putnam 1978: 42–3; see Laidlaw, this volume). As Putnam observes, the question ‘why was the professor there?’ could be answered in a potentially infinite variety of ways, including that the professor was there so that he could not leave before midnight at a speed faster than light, given that nobody (certainly not professors) can travel faster than light. To the ethnographer or historian it may seem that the answers suggested by scientific psychology have a similarly bizarre character, quite unrelated to the questions that matter to people in everyday life. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Cognitive scientists are typically interested in fundamentally the same problems that perplex interpretive anthropologists, as well as historians and others. In the scenario Putnam presents, all would be eager to know about the professor’s motivations and intentions. The ethnographer or historian might seek to contextualize the professor’s own account of his intentions within a web of locally and temporally variable values (e.g. whether this event occurred

1. Although this remark does not apply to Laidlaw, who recognizes to a considerable extent the value and relevance of scientific enquiry.
on a California campus in the 1960s or in a twenty-first century theological seminary). The question of how the professor’s behaviour is judged in the prevailing cultural context (e.g. one that celebrates free love or one that counsels moral censure or litigation), is unquestionably relevant to understanding his predicament. But the cognitive scientist urges us to heed an additional set of questions. For instance (and this is only an example), what kinds of evolved human capacities govern processes of reputation management? How are these brought to bear when a transgression occurs?

Our closest relatives, the great apes, do not have to deal with such issues. Chimpanzee transgressions do not become the object of gossip or slander that might handicap their abilities to mobilize authority and resources in the future, even among strangers. But humans have to make immensely subtle calculations about such matters, resulting in a glorious repertoire of strategies for managing their reputations. Recent studies suggest, for example, that confession is widely used as a means of damage limitation in circumstances when exposure is a serious risk, based on the intuition that punishment will be less severe if the transgressor displays remorse. The greater the risk of exposure and the more serious its consequences the stronger the urge to confess becomes (at least by the statistical measures used in these kinds of studies). Consequently, meaning and context matter, even for cognitive scientists—in fact, especially for cognitive scientists. People, even professors, tend to lie when they think they have a low risk of detection and to confess when they fear discovery. But these strategies are carefully modulated by subtle features of context: how severe the punishments for a particular transgression are likely to be in a particular cultural setting, the extent to which forgiveness might be anticipated in response to displays of remorse and contrition, and so on. And these kinds of judgements come into play irrespective of actual guilt, for sometimes even the innocent confess (even innocent professors, if that is not a contradiction in terms).

If cognitive and interpretive anthropologists are really studying the same things, as I think they are, then the crunch question is whether the kinds of answers they provide could be integrated. Two extreme views on this matter may be distinguished. Hardline cognitivists maintain that conscious thought is merely a surface expression of processes outside our awareness, and that the latter processes shape and constrain our consciousness whereas it seldom (if ever) happens the other way around (e.g. Bering and Shackelford in press). For this reason asking people about their intentions or the meanings of their experiences and observations elicits no more than cryptic clues to the real causes of their behaviour. We ignore these clues at our peril, to be sure, but they do not constitute explanations in themselves. Hardline interpretivists in-
sist that meanings and reasons are only explainable in terms of other meanings and reasons, whether those of informants (the ethnographic gambit) or of the interpreter (the hermeneutic gambit)\(^2\). Both forms of hardline interpretivism constitute a circular strategy (amusingly dubbed ‘the hermeneutic vortex’\(^3\)) that accomplishes ever more elaborate stories but forecloses the possibility of ever explaining anything. An alternative to both extremes is available, based on a certain amount of compromise but also a large dose of messy-world empirical enquiry.

There is now a mounting body of evidence that explicit representations, including many (if not all) the things go to make a religious tradition, are influenced by implicit cognition, about which we can only learn indirectly, through experimental research (both laboratory-based and naturalistic). Such findings have opened up the possibility of two major types of contribution to core anthropological problems. The first type seeks to contribute to an explanation for cross-culturally recurrent features of religious thinking and behaviour, regardless of the specificities of local contexts and histories. Such a strategy proceeds on the basis that, all else being equal, certain kinds of religious concepts (for instance) will be more widespread in human societies than others. Such claims pertain to statistical patterns of recurrence in the ethnographic record as a whole rather than to individual cases. The second potential contribution from this quarter, however, considers how specified environmental conditions bias the activation of different types and configurations of cognitive mechanisms in predictable ways. How does the presence of a particular institutional system trigger or inhibit implicit thinking, overt behaviour and consequent patterns of cultural transmission? The latter question (which of course could be fractionated in a wide range of narrower variants), encompasses our concerns about Putnam’s unfortunate Professor, whose individual mental states and behaviour can only be fully understood in its wider context. While a generalizing approach may accurately quantify the likelihood of intended sexual transgressions on the part of half-naked men in girls’ dormitories, the more detail we provide about the context in which such escapades occur the more precisely we can predict the psychological states and behavioural choices of particular would-be transgressors. Lawyers do it. So do anthropologists. But on the whole they do it by appeal to more or less im-

\(^2\) In the latter case, paradoxically, the conscious meanings attributed by the interpreter are sometimes viewed as inaccessible to the actor, a state of affairs that may attributed to a diversity of factors (e.g. collective unconscious, dynamic unconscious, false consciousness, mystification, hegemonic ideology, etc.).

\(^3\) Lawson and McCauley 1993.
plicit assumptions, stereotypes, or fashionable interpretive frameworks rather than with reference to testable theories of the way people actually think.

Implicit cognitive biases, even if situated in richly specified sociocultural contexts, may turn out to be only part of the story, however. Contrary to some cognitivist hardliners, I would argue that conscious reasoning and reflection also influence the way we behave, in turn shaping and constraining processes of cultural innovation and transmission. Experimental psychology provides just a fraction of the evidence needed to understand such processes. We must look also to the data commanded by ethnographers and historians, among others who catalogue the statements and deeds of our fellow human beings in their historically specific cultural habitats. For this reason, anthropologists must be part of the explanatory endeavour, in on the ground floor. Although we cannot (yet) measure the relative importance of implicit and explicit cognition in patterns of social behaviour and cultural efflorescence that is the direction in which I believe we need to go. Let us begin, however, by considering how far the cognitivist hardliners can take us.