SECULARISM & NONRELIGION

Book Review: *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not*, by Robert N. McCauley

Reviewed by: J. Tuomas Harviainen[1]
University of Tampere, Finland

In *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not* (2011), Robert N. McCauley seeks to explain why religious concepts seem to persist while scientific ideas require a community and control mechanism to support them. Religion and science are not exactly opposed per se, but conflicts between them do take place all around the world, especially in fundamentalism-influenced societies.

To explain the issue, McCauley shows that religion—or, more precisely, "popular religion"—relies on cognitive processes that are maturationally natural to humans, i.e. either innate to our species or learned at a very early stage. The most central of these to his argument is "theory of mind", the ability to understand other perceived entities as agents, and following from it, the possibility of postulating the existence of other agents. In contrast, science (which McCauley sees as connected but distinct from technology) and theology are not maturationally natural. They need abstract thinking, conscious reflection and peer community support. This reliance makes them fragile.

McCauley does his best to balance readability and precision. However, in trying to stay layman-friendly, he thoroughly explains a lot of older findings and hypotheses, relying on key material from, for example, Pascal Boyer (2001) and Justin L. Barrett (2004) as well as his own earlier work with E. Thomas Lawson (e.g., McCauley & Lawson, 2002). For the purpose of building thorough arguments, he also explicates many common sense facts, with much verbosity. Together, these two elements make most of the book rather uninteresting to a reader already familiar with cognitive study of religion. On the upside, the repetition leads to a great list of references a novice can easily follow up on.

The last section finally offers something really new. In it McCauley presents his basic tenets, which he calls the "surprising consequences". They are not really that surprising, but the fact that they have now been formulated clearly and together is a very good thing, especially since, according to McCauley, traditional comparisons between religion and science are misbegotten. Of particular value is his way of looking at religion and science as a four-type square. In it are two divisions: on one axis, commonplace explanations are differentiated from reflection-requiring ones (popular religion from theology, mundane physical explanations from science) because of the different cognitive processes involved. On the other axis, religious and physical explanations (both reflective and popular) differ

1 Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: J. Tuomas Harviainen, University of Tampere, Research Center for Information and Media, Kalevantie 4, 33100 Tampere, Finland. email: jushar@utu.fi.

Secularism and Nonreligion, 1, i-ii (2012). Published at: www.secularismandnonreligion.org.

from each other through their opposed perspectives on agent causality: religion has a relatively unrestricted view of agents' abilities to affect the world, while the scientific view on agents is highly restricted. McCauley's observations on how popular religion is inevitably "theologically incorrect", and about the fragility of scientific processes, are also significant.

This ambitious work obviously seeks to be highly encompassing and explanatory, on a heavily debated subject, and presents its arguments well. It is not, however, as captivating a read as McCauley's earlier work with Lawson. This is particularly true for experienced scholars of cognitive study of religion, who will find little new in it before the last 60 or so pages.

References

Barrett, J. L. (2004). *Why would anyone believe in God?* Lanham: AltaMira Press.

Boyer, P. (2001). *Religion explained: The evolutionary origins of religious thought.* New York: Basic Books.

McCauley, R. N. (2011). *Why religion is natural and science is not.* New York: Oxford University Press.

McCauley, R. N. & Lawson, E. T. (2002). *Bringing ritual to mind: Psychological foundations of cultural forms.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.