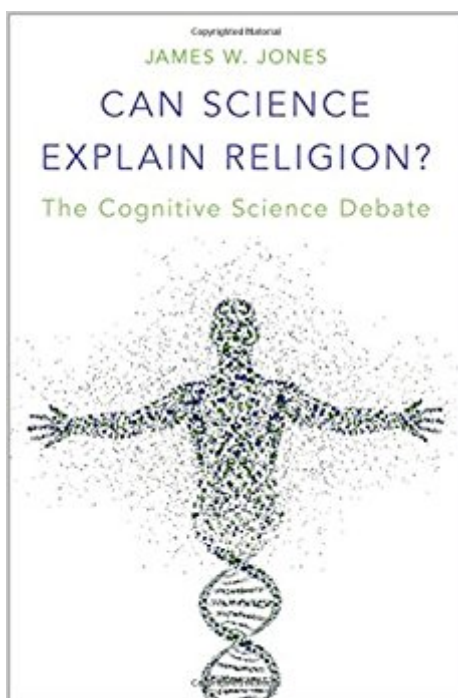


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Can Science Explain Religion?: The Cognitive Science Debate



Synopsis

The "New Atheist" movement of recent years has put the science-versus-religion controversy back on the popular cultural agenda. Anti-religious polemicists are convinced that the application of the new sciences of the mind to religious belief gives them the final weapons in their battle against irrationality and superstition. What used to be a trickle of research papers scattered in specialized scientific journals has now become a torrent of books, articles, and commentary in the popular media pressing the case that the cognitive science of religion can finally fulfill the enlightenment dream of shrinking religion into insignificance, if not eliminating it altogether. James W. Jones argues that these claims are demonstrably false. He notes that cognitive science research is religiously neutral; it can be deployed in many different ways in relation to the actual belief in and practice of religion: to undermine it, to simply study it, and to support it. These different approaches, Jones suggests, reflect the background assumptions and viewpoints brought to the interpretation of the data. The goal of this book is not to defend either a general religious outlook or a particular religious tradition, but to make the case that while there is much to learn from the cognitive scientific study of religion, attempts to use it to "explain" religion are exaggerated and misguided. Drawing on scientific research and logical argument *Can Science Explain Religion?* directly confronts the claims of these debunkers of religion, providing an accessibly written, persuasive account of why they are not convincing.

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Customer Reviews

"This is a tour de force. Jones takes the reader through the full range of debates concerning the use and abuse of cognitive science with respect to religion, displaying both expertise and panache. His unique perspective comes from his work as a clinical psychologist. He calls the different parties to take responsibility for their abstract theories in an argument that is both compelling and morally serious." --Timothy Jenkins, Reader in Anthropology and Religion, University of Cambridge "Few scholars are better suited than James W. Jones to explore the new frontiers of science and religion. He brings philosophical acumen, psychotherapeutic experience, and spiritual sensitivity to bear on the question of what, if anything, new findings in brain-mind science can tell us about religious beliefs and practices. A necessary book for anyone interested in the future of scientific approaches to religion." --Kelly Bulkeley, author of *The Wondering Brain: Thinking about Religion With and Beyond Cognitive Neuroscience* "This stimulating book on the attempts of cognitive science to explain away religion has the virtue of being fair-minded and comprehensive, without the too-common fault of being boring. Bringing together a knowledge of contemporary science and a sympathy for religion, there is much of value to both believers and those who doubt. It may not be, as the author rather hopes, the last word on the subject. But it is certainly much more than the first word." --Michael Ruse, author of *Atheism: What Everyone Needs to Know*

James W. Jones is Distinguished Professor of Religion at Rutgers University. He is the author of fifteen books and numerous professional papers, and the editor of several volumes of collected papers dealing with religion, psychology, and science. He serves on the editorial boards of several publications. He is an ordained priest in the Episcopal Church USA and has maintained a private practice of clinical psychology, specializing in psychophysiology and behavioral medicine.

This is by far the best book I've read on the relationship science has to religion. Not focusing on any particular religion, the author provides powerful arguments that religion needs to be seen in its own terms rather than as just a simplistic holdover of our ancestral DNA. I particularly liked his multiple explanations argument, showing that something like suicide can be explained sociologically, psychologically, economically and even through physics (the rate of a falling body off a tall building) rather than as a simple one-cause. I get tired of hearing reductionist explanations that attribute religion to evolutionary processes and so am so pleased that this book was written. I've been recommending it to my friends and hope that it becomes widely known and read. Maybe someone could be ambitious and consider doing an unabridged audio version. I give it my highest recommendation!

A great expose on where we stand in the Grand scheme of things. We basically don't know up from down. There are many opinions on the nature of reality. Each comes from a special point of view or context. Every possible explanation is incomplete, :) as constraints, and is rendered from a specific worldview. A pluralistic universe requires many types of explanations. This is the thrust of this work.. well worth the read.

Should be required reading for all budding scientists. Practicing scientists need to read this book, but will they take the medicine it offers? On the other hand, if you are not in this field, the first chapter may bog you down with all the personalities and seemingly trivial understandings and developments in the field. Chapter 2 heats up! Finally an ADULT enters the room, someone who has lived a fuller life outside the mind-distorting ivory lab, has seen these same ideas meet their proper nemesis and back off. Don't worry we'll never wake up to a newspaper headline: "Science has discovered that God is dead!" but this book gives you the insight and analysis you need to take on similar thinking and assertions. You are not merely imagining that such an anti-religious effort is underway; it is. James W Jones does not present a religious outlook of his own, but argues that many cognitive scientists have not been neutral -- and should be. He shows you in detail their failure of rationality, their self-contradictions, and uneducated narrowness of thought. (It appears many of these folk, never read outside their own field.) Those who claim expertise and authority over religion as cognition, minimize the actual content of the cognition (something strange about that). Religion is understood to be simply rooted in childhood (you don't say) and treated as evolutionary "modules" serving various survival or reproductive purposes alone, (or else are "accidents," an evolutionary catch-all category). Religion is never approached by these scientists at its most serious and rational but only as a "popular" cultural phenomenon, weak and lazy in contrast to science's serious effort, supposedly rigorous thought and hard work. Jones argues this state of affairs in his discipline is a tragedy because scientific study can give us much greater insights into religion. The new atheists --weather in the closet or out-- are determined to own science. Now is the time to demand that science serve truth and honest rationality -- not religion -- but not ideological anti-religious, anti-human, ends either. This book is excellent. Plan to read parts of it again.

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