Introduction

The Cognitive Theories of Religion

The last 20 years have seen a major surge of research into the origins, mechanisms and function of religious belief and behaviour. This surge is for the most part a result of the emergence (or re-emergence) of the ‘naturalistic’ perspective in the study of religion inspired by recent developments in evolutionary human sciences, biology, anthropology and cognitive science. Some philosophers and scientists have taken these new approaches to religion to be the final nail into the coffin of reasonable religious commitment. The suggestion seems to be that since we have finally been able to produce a true materialistic and naturalistic explanation for the emergence of religious beliefs and practices, we can now free ourselves from the grasp of ancient gods and spirits. This time explaining religion has genuinely amounted to explaining it away. While these claims are based on new theories, the claims themselves are not in any way new: they echo the claims that have been made on each occasion a new explanation of religion has emerged since the time of Marx and Freud. Is anything different this time?

Some things are indisputably different. When formulating their explanations of religion, Marx and Freud did not have access to the biological and psychological knowledge we now possess. We have a wealth of knowledge regarding the biology and evolution of Homo sapiens – knowledge that gives us an edge over that of our immediate intellectual forbearers. We have also made great advances in explaining and understanding human mental life in the last 30 years. This is mainly due to the development of cognitive science and neuroscience. Taken together, these developments have enabled an examination of the human mind and its products, such as human culture and religion, as parts of nature, both human and non-human. Given all this, it is ironic that most of the leading contemporary religious thinkers and philosophers of religion still write as though the best going naturalistic theories of religion remain those of Marx and Freud.\(^1\)

This tendency on the part of religious thinkers and philosophers to tinker with scientifically obsolete ideas about the emergence of religion is increasingly out of touch. It might be an overstatement to say that among working sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists of religion (especially scientifically minded ones), the theories of Freud and Marx are considered relics rather than serious scientific hypotheses, but it would probably not be far off the mark. As these new approaches to religion gain scientific credence, numerous philosophical and scientific critics of religion have recruited new explanations of religion into

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their arsenal of arguments against religion. If religious thinkers and philosophers want to take these challenges seriously, they must engage with the contemporary evolutionary human sciences and cognitive sciences and leave Freud and Marx behind.

Although the naturalistic study of religion is rarely motivated simply by anti-religious interests, it has been heartily endorsed by atheists of different kinds outside and inside the academy. Sometimes it has given rise to the kind of atheist triumphalism exemplified by Richard Dawkins, according to whom religion can be explained as a result of an inbuilt ‘irrationality module’ in the human brain. Of course Dawkins knows that things are not that simple. Nevertheless, new ‘scientific results’ about ‘God genes’, ‘God modules’ and ‘God spots’ in the brain have given the impression that we are on the verge of something big and the new sciences of the mind and human nature will give us the ultimate answers we seek. Regardless of whether we should expect a grand unified theory of religion to emerge in the next decade, the triumphalism of this bold scientific venture into the mystery of religion is real. This has made many religious people – both inside and outside academia – nervous: new findings seem to be coming in almost every day that are claimed to threaten their precious beliefs. Is this anxiety warranted?

It is one of the chief aims of the book to argue that in large part it is not. Many worries are based on misunderstandings about what the hypotheses in these fields actually are and what they explain – misunderstandings that are sometimes shared and perpetuated by those who are engaged in frontline research in these areas. However, I will also be arguing that these new naturalistic hypotheses do not run orthogonal to religious truth claims: there is at least a prima facie case for seeing some of the worries, if not the largest ones, as legitimate.

The overarching question we will be building up to throughout this book is whether current explanations of religion have relevance for theistic religious beliefs in a sense I will carefully clarify as the argument proceeds. More specifically, I will be asking whether recent naturalistic explanations of religion – in particular, those explanations grouped under the head of the currently prominent cognitive science of religion – have any theological and philosophical consequences for mainstream forms of theism. Since the naturalistic explanations of religion which are the subject of this book will be largely unfamiliar to most readers in their details, a proper treatment of this question will necessitate some extensive preliminary exposition and clarification before it can be answered in an adequate way.

The Cognitive Science of Religion

Because of the diversity currently characterising the field of evolution and psychology of religion, it would be futile to attempt to squeeze it all into a one book. Instead, I focus in the present work on one important field of research in
the study of religion and cognitive science usually called the cognitive science of religion (henceforth CSR). The CSR has been succinctly characterised as follows:

Within the large and loosely integrated fields of cognitive science and evolutionary psychology, there has emerged a relatively tightly-knit group of scholars engaged in what has become known as the ‘cognitive science of religion’. This group of scholars enjoys an unusual measure of agreement on shared presuppositions, methods, and problems. Over the last twenty years or so they have succeeded in establishing not only a paradigm for their research, but also several institutional centres around the world, a journal and a book series, and a substantial literature based on new empirical research that has given rise to a series of new research problems.

Several scholars are associated with CSR of whom the most prominent ones are E. Thomas Lawson, Robert McCauley, Harvey Whitehouse, Pascal Boyer and Justin Barrett. Lawson and McCauley’s Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture is widely considered as the starting point of CSR for two reasons: firstly, the book developed the first theory in the CSR, the ritual form theory; and secondly, it laid out the basic methodological assumptions for connecting the study of religion to the study of cognition. Harvey Whitehouse has formulated the influential modes of religiosity theory which attempts to explain how religious traditions are shaped by pan-human psychological structures. Although the methodological and empirical contributions of McCauley, Whitehouse and Lawson are significant, I will be focusing mainly on Boyer and Barrett for reasons I will make clear in what follows.

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4 See also the follow up Bringing Ritual to Mind: Psychological Foundations of Ritual Forms (Cambridge, 2002).

5 For the modes theory, see Harvey Whitehouse, Arguments and Icons: Divergent Modes of Religiosity (New York, 2000) and Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission (Walnut Creek, 2004). See also, Harvey Whitehouse, Robert McCauley (eds), Mind and Religion: Psychological and Cognitive Foundations of Religiosity, (Walnut Creek, 2005).
In addition to the aforementioned ‘five horsemen’, scholars such as Scott Atran, Ilkka Pyysiäinen, Stewarth Guthrie, and Jesse Bering are also regularly associated with CSR. In addition to these writers working inside CSR, we should also mention one important person outside the CSR who has had a profound influence on the central claims of CSR writers, namely, the anthropologist Dan Sperber.

In addition to Barrett and Boyer, this book will also be focusing on Scott Atran and Dan Sperber. I have homed in on these four key writers because they share a relatively stable set of methodological assumptions and theories, that is, they all approach religion as a by-product of non-religious cognition. This religion as a by-product thesis has sometimes been regarded as the core of what some call the standard model of the cognitive science of religion. We will return to the religion as a by-product thesis as well as the standard model later in more detail. However, despite the shared assumptions, we should not overestimate the similarities between these writers: we will see that CSR writers exhibit major differences with respect to their background assumptions and as such do not necessarily constitute ‘a relatively tightly-knit group’. Rather, what we discover in these writers are certain recurring themes, and this book attempts to elucidate them.

Boyer’s two main books, The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: a Cognitive Theory of Religion (2001) and Religion Explained: Evolutionary Origins of Religion Thought (2001), have been crucial in the development of the standard model of the CSR. The former is a quite technical overview of the possibilities of applying cognitive science in the anthropology of religion, whereas the latter is a semi-popular take on the whole CSR with a strong emphasis on Evolutionary Psychology.

In addition to Boyer’s Religion Explained, Atran’s In Gods We Trust: Evolutionary Landscapes of Religion (2002) has been very important in making CSR theories known to scholars in the study of religion and cognitive science. Although Atran shares a lot of common ground with other writers in the CSR,
his interest in religion seems to be a by-product of his interest in the cognitive foundations of culture in general. His work spans across the study of folk biological categorisation and terrorism to cognitive anthropology in general.10

Justin Barrett’s contribution to CSR has mainly been in providing experimental data. However, his Why Would Anyone Believe in God (2004) is the latest overview of CSR research written by an ‘insider’ and one of its special features is the strong focus on developmental psychology instead of the evolutionary emphasis of Atran and Boyer’s overviews.

Finally, although Dan Sperber is not normally associated with the CSR, he has contributed immensely to it, especially with respect to methodological questions. Sperber could even be seen as a kind of godfather of the cognitive and evolutionary study of religion since in his works he has attempted to create a framework that would combine anthropology and cognitive sciences into a naturalistic research programme in the study of culture. In his Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach (1996) he summarises his epidemiology of representations theory which conceptualises the study of culture as a study of widespread mental representations in human populations, and insists that human cognitive systems have a significant role in explaining cultural diversity and stability. Sperber’s epidemiology is explicitly adopted by Atran and Boyer and other writers in the field refer to his works.11

The Cognitive Revolution

As we can see from the diverse backgrounds of CSR writers, CSR theories draw from several different disciplines and fields of research which chiefly study the development and structure of human cognition. We can see five different developments behind the emergence of the CSR:

1. The cognitive revolution and the development of the cognitive sciences.
2. The emergence of the idea of domain specificity, that is, the idea that the structures of the human mind shape and constrain the information we acquire in different domains in different ways.
3. The emergence of cognitive anthropology as an approach in anthropology.

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4. The development of different models of *Cultural Darwinism*, that is, models that use Darwinian resources to explain cultural evolution.

5. *Evolutionary Psychology* as an interdisciplinary research programme.

The general background for all cognition-based approaches is the cognitive revolution in psychology and computer science which led to the emergence of cognitive psychology and cognitive sciences from 1950s onwards. Very roughly, the core idea of the early cognitive science was that human mental life and thinking can be understood in terms of a computational process – a form of information processing in which individual symbols are transformed into other symbols according to a set of rules. This *symbolic processing* paradigm (sometimes called *cognitivism* or *computationalism*) was the starting point of cognitive science theorising until the 1970s saw the emergence of a competing paradigm usually known as *connectionism*. Rather than seeing thinking as a serial process of computation, connectionists advanced the claim that information is processed and represented in the brain by holistic states of neural networks. Regardless of the details of how information processing actually takes place in the brain, one of the most important results of early cognitive science was the claim that the ways in which the mind processes information have an impact on the information itself. This claim was first advanced by Noam Chomsky according to whom the structures of natural human languages are strongly constrained by innate, psychological capacities of language processing. Thus Chomsky was the first to formulate the basic idea of *innateness* or *nativism*. The details of this proposal are far from clear, but the basic idea provided a template for future research programmes. The idea was, simply, that natural languages are constrained by our psychological makeup – mental architecture that we all share as human beings. Chomsky and other pioneers of cognitive sciences argued that the mind is not a blank slate which only passively records and memorises the information which is presented to it. Rather, the human mind comes with biases, schemas, models and mechanisms that actively shape the acquisition and transmission of information.\(^\text{12}\)

The second major development behind CSR was the emerging consensus from cognitive psychology according to which the innate biases and information processing tendencies of the human mind have different effects in different domains of knowledge. The basic idea of this domain-specificity hypothesis is, again very roughly, that in the very early stages of human development we can already see very specialised and context sensitive cognitive mechanisms at work. It follows that rather than consisting of domain-general mechanisms, which would be applied to all domains of learning and information processing, the mind consists of numerous domain-specific mechanisms, which have highly specialised

functions. In other words, humans learn different kinds of information in different ways.  

The third essential development contributing to the birth of the CSR was the emergence of cognitive anthropology as a reaction to the developments in cognitive psychology. Several anthropologists realised how the cognitive revolution could benefit anthropology: if the human mind actually had an effect on the content of the information which was acquired and transmitted, then this fact might provide a starting point for explaining why cultures exhibit recurrent patterns. According to this view, the human mind does not just acquire and memorise all information that is available to it in a given cultural environment. Instead, it transforms this information and thus shapes the cultural environment itself. In other words, the relationship between culture and mind is not a one-way process in which cultural input explains all individual psychological processes as some social constructivists had argued. What the cognitive sciences had shown was that the relationship was actually a two-way process: the mind not only acquires cultural information, but also transforms it. In the light of cognitive psychology, the anthropologist could now assume that underlying all cultural forms and diverse belief systems, there was a single cognitive architecture shared by all humans.

The fourth development that contributed to the emergence of the CSR was the emergence of Cultural Darwinism, that is, theories that apply the conceptual resources of Darwinian evolutionary theory to model cultural evolution. Usually three different theories are mentioned in this context: (1) memetics, (2) gene/culture co-evolution and (3) Sperber’s epidemiology of representations. According to the basic ideas of memetics formulated by Richard Dawkins, we can explain cultural evolution in the same way we explain biological evolution, but instead of genes, molecular units of genetic code, we have memes, units of culture, ranging from learned behavioural patterns to beliefs and ideas. Although memetics has been endorsed by some famous philosophers, such as Daniel Dennett, it has, in fact, been rejected by the majority of scholars in the field. More popular have been the proposals of gene/culture co-evolution theorists who have claimed that culture does not float free from biological evolution, but rather both become intertwined in human evolution. Biological and psychological capacities inform human learning and information acquisition whereas human behaviour that is based on this information constrains biological evolution. Finally, we can understand Sperber’s aforementioned epidemiology of representations as a form of Cultural Darwinism. We need not dwell on these theories at this point, since I will be returning to them in detail later. What is important to notice for the moment is that all Cultural Darwinist models are committed to a position that I will be calling selectionism: they conceptualise culture as widespread individual ideas in people’s heads and

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13 The seminal work in this area is Lawrence Hirschfeld, Susan Gelman (eds), *Mapping the Mind: Domain Specificity in Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge, 1994).

set out to explain why some ideas have been selected instead of some others. According to this view, cultures are not entities or structures, but widespread ideas in a given population. This starting point makes it possible to explain these ideas with the conceptual tools of evolutionary biology that seeks to explain why certain traits are widespread in some animal populations.15

Finally, the CSR owes many of its ideas to Evolutionary Psychology from which especially Boyer and Atran draw extensively. First of all, we must realise that there is no single ‘evolutionary psychology’. Rather we should distinguish Evolutionary Psychology (EP) the paradigm (with capital letters) from the field of evolutionary psychology, as philosopher David Buller has suggested.16 Evolutionary psychology as a field of research is a broad and loosely connected group of diverse disciplines such as behavioural ecology, human ethology and evolutionary anthropology. In this sense, evolutionary psychology is a general term for approaches that use contemporary evolutionary theory as a background for psychological, anthropological or neuroscientific theorising.17 However, Evolutionary Psychology (with capital letters) is used to refer to a specific paradigm advocated by a group of scholars with relatively well-defined theories and background assumptions. The main persons in this group are psychologists Steven Pinker, David Buss and Leda Cosmides, and anthropologist John Tooby. The central idea of this paradigm is that the human mind is a massively modular system whose modules (specialised systems) were created by natural selection to solve adaptive problems in our ancestral environment. Today these once adaptive modules perform many tasks that they were not selected for and form the basis of our modern cultural forms. Most people in EP believe EP to have resources by which socio-cultural and behavioural sciences can be integrated with biological sciences. We will return to these points later in detail.18

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17 For overviews, see Louise Barrett, Robin Dunbar (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology* (New York, 2007) and Louise Barrett, Robin Dunbar, John Lycett (eds), *Human Evolutionary Psychology* (Basingstoke, 2002).

18 The seminal work of this group is Leda Cosmides, John Tooby, Jerome Barkow (eds), *The Adapted Mind* (New York, 1992). David Buss, *Evolutionary Psychology: The New Science of the Mind* (Boston, 1999) is the standard introduction. See also David Buss (ed.), *Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology* (London, 2005) and Steven Pinker’s *How the
The Cognitive Science of Religion as a Field of Research

The CSR combines the developments characterised in the previous section and puts them to work in explaining cross-culturally recurrent patterns in religious beliefs and behaviour. CSR’s central idea is the religion as a by-product thesis according to which religious beliefs and practices are informed by our non-religious cognitive systems working in different domains. One of the consequences of this thesis is that there is no religious cognition or religious domain of thinking, but rather religious beliefs and behaviours are explained by the same non-religious cognitive systems that are also at work in non-religious domains of thinking. In other words, religious thinking spans over several non-religious domains of information processing and the regularities of these non-religious domains also explain the regularities in religious thinking. Although this claim might sound innocent enough, we will see that it actually conflicts with many quite common assumptions in the study of religion.

What this book will be focusing on is a certain set of CSR theories and methodological assumptions that I call the Standard Model of CSR which is more or less represented by Atran, Barrett and Boyer. I am not saying that the standard model is the only way to understand what CSR is, but I am saying that it is a view that, at minimum, can be reasonably rationally reconstructed from the writings of the aforementioned scholars. As mentioned before, the aim of the standard model is to explain the natural origin and pervasiveness of religious ideas and practices. According to this model, religious beliefs arise and persist mainly for the following reasons:

1. They are counter-intuitive in ways that make them optimally suited for recall and transmission (Minimal Counter-Intuitiveness, MCI hypothesis).
2. They emerge and are supported by cognitive mechanisms that generate beliefs about agents and agency (Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device, HADD hypothesis).
3. They typically represent the religious entities as minded agents who, because of their counter-intuitive character, stand to benefit us in our attempt to maintain stable relationships in large interacting groups.
4. They are also inference rich and thus allow us to generate narratives about them that enhance their memorability, make them attractive as objects of ritual, and increase our affective reactions towards them.


We will return to all these factors at length later. While none of them just on their own explain the cross cultural salience of religious beliefs, it is proposed that their combination adds up to a powerful explanation of the origin and prevalence of the diverse religious beliefs in the world and the easiness with which they transmit across human populations.

A few words about the term ‘the cognitive science of religion’ and its usage are in order here. The term ‘a cognitive theory of religion’ was first used by Stewart Guthrie in an article of the same name dating back to 1980. It pops up again in the name of Boyer’s book The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion (1994). It is unclear at precisely what point the term ‘the cognitive science of religion’ came to denote a field of study with which some scholars felt they identified. This development might have been catalysed by the appearance of the first popular ‘trade books’, especially Boyer’s Religion Explained in 2001.

First of all, it should be noted that the cognitive science of religion does not stably denote a single entity, be it a discipline or a theory. Disciplines have professors, journals, training programmes and other institutional structures. The CSR is not a discipline in this sense: it does not have its own professors or basic level training programmes. It is true that in the last couple of years, it has been developing in this direction, since institutes have been created (Institute of Cognition and Culture in Queens University, Belfast and Centre for Anthropology and Mind at Oxford), and several journals have been founded, most importantly The Journal of Cognition and Culture. These developments, however, do not make CSR a discipline, but rather it should perhaps be seen as an interdisciplinary endeavour designed to draw people together from the study of religion, anthropology, psychology and cognitive science. It is difficult to say what established discipline would be the ‘parent’ discipline of the CSR. Would it be anthropology? Many CSR writers are either anthropologists or have training in anthropology (for instance, Harvey Whitehouse). What about psychology or cognitive science? There are a number of psychologists and cognitive scientists associated with the field (for instance, Justin Barrett). (Of course, one must also remember that cognitive science itself is not in any way uniform.) Or maybe it is the study of religion or comparative religion, since many CSR writers are located in religious studies departments? CSR is simultaneously a part of all of these disciplines, but does not fit clearly inside any of them. Therefore, it seems reasonable to say that whatever the term ‘CSR’ refers to institutionally or in terms of subject domains, it does not denote a clearly demarcated entity.

Neither does the term ‘CSR’ refer to a single theory of religion even if Guthrie and Boyer talk about ‘a cognitive theory of religion’. If one looks at Boyer’s The Naturalness of Religious Ideas, one finds not a theory of religion, but an outline of a possible approach to the study of religious phenomena and a great many hypotheses that this approach might generate and test. Rather than just one single

theory, there are many theories and hypotheses being put forward in the CSR regarding different features of phenomena some (but not all) of us might call religious. The same goes with respect to Lawson and McCauley’s important early book *Rethinking Religion* (1990). What we find there is not a theory of religion, but an outline of an approach or a research programme and a very specific theory of rituals. It is true that later books (especially Boyer’s *Religion Explained*) intended for more general audiences (and in the process generating a kind of disciplinary *esprit de corps* for the CSR) tend to present CSR findings as a general theory of religion. But a close reading of books like this reveals that the writers themselves do not really believe that such a theory is even possible. We will return to their reasons later. For now, suffice it to say that whatever CSR is, it is not a single theory of religion.

The problem is that the term ‘CSR’ is normally applied in academic discussion in ways that are vague and fuzzy around the edges. Many people use the term to refer to all kinds of research programmes, theories and suggestions dealing with the origins and evolution of religion. According to this usage, hypotheses about the biological evolution of religion, for instance, would qualify as parts of the cognitive science of religion field. This usage might also imply that CSR is closely related to Evolutionary Psychology: indeed some people have thought that CSR just is evolutionary psychology of religion. On the other hand, there are people who object to evolutionary considerations – and Evolutionary Psychology in particular – being a part of the CSR proper and maintain that the CSR is mainly about cognitive psychology of religion in a strict sense. They would also reject all attempts to link CSR with approaches that seek to explain some features of religion as biological adaptations. All these problems with fixing the reference of the concept reflect the messy methodological debates and underdeveloped theories and hypotheses being thrown around in what could be called ‘the evolution of religion business’. All of this methodological uncertainty implies that (to use Kuhnian terms) CSR and related fields of research are still in their pre-paradigmatic stage. As a consequence, we should not expect the term ‘CSR’ to have clearly defined boundaries at any point in the near future.

Finally, it must also be acknowledged that as a field of research there is no telling what the future holds for CSR. Because the testing of theories and hypotheses is still in its infancy, CSR core ideas might face considerable revisions in the future. Currently, we are not even sure whether the CSR’s main theories, such as the MCI hypothesis (see below), are well supported by empirical evidence. Therefore, it is quite possible that many current CSR hypotheses will yet turn out to be more false than true or at least suffer considerable revisions. It is also an open question whether the CSR will be integrated into some existing discipline(s) or not.

My suggestion here is that we should use the term ‘CSR’ to refer to a field of research. This usage would emphasise the interdisciplinary and multi-theoretic nature of the CSR as it is currently practiced. It would also make clear that we are not talking about a single theory, but rather an approach with some commonality of methodological assumptions, hypotheses and ways of testing those hypotheses.
If, as suggested, we understand CSR as a field of research, then we can distinguish three different theoretical levels or layers in it:

1. Its core, that is, its main hypotheses and theories, such as the aforementioned MCI hypothesis and the HADD hypothesis. These are discussed and evaluated by researchers in the field.
2. Its auxiliary theories and methodological assumption, such as Cultural Darwinism and domain specificity (and other background theories mentioned earlier). These are taken more or less granted as background assumptions by CSR researchers.
3. Its broad philosophical framework which includes the most general philosophical assumptions about issues such as scientific explanation, ontology and epistemology. These generic assumptions almost never get discussed in the field: they are implicitly assumed rather than argued for.

I suggest distinguishing these layers because it makes philosophical and theological engagement with CSR much clearer, since different issues need to be discussed at different levels. One of my main arguments will be that different kinds of broad philosophical frameworks can be made compatible with the CSR. In other words, levels (1) and (2) are compatible with different kinds of positions at level (3).

The Argument and Structure of the Book

In order to assess the religious relevance of CSR theories, we need to choose a starting point. Ascertaining the religious relevance of a given scientific theory will always depend on the (non-)religious or (a)theological ‘theory’ or model – e.g., atheism, deism, pantheism, Buddhism, theism – which is implicitly or explicitly being assumed. With respect to this book, I will be examining CSR’s religious relevance with respect to theism. If it turns out to be the case that the theist can adopt core CSR results into her theistic framework, then CSR does not give the theist reasons to doubt her theism. What I will argue is that this is in fact the case: given that we understand CSR results in a certain way, the theist can understand them in a theistic framework. This does not mean that the theist is out of trouble: it might be the case that there is no contradiction between theism per se and CSR theories but CSR might yet have effects on specific arguments for theism. In other words, instead of debunking theism CSR could lower our confidence in theism or remove some evidence or arguments given for it. These possibilities will be examined in detail. The argument will be that whatever the results are, they are not fatal to theism. But in order to make this argument, I must carefully examine the methods and putative findings of the CSR and distinguish these findings from the metaphysical background against which they are usually understood. So, we need
to understand how the CSR works, what it’s metaphysical and methodological assumptions are and how it explains what it explains.

What I will be doing in this book is the following. I will argue that the CSR standard model is usually understood and presented inside a certain philosophical framework, which I call ‘strict naturalism’. I will then go on to provide criticisms of this framework on the basis of current theories in philosophy of science and philosophy of psychology. My criticisms are designed to be independent from any possible case for theism, because I want to make them as convincing as I can for non-theists. Further, I will argue for a new framework which, I claim, is as or more satisfactory philosophically and also better compatible with the intentions of CSR writers. I show that if we remove some of the assumptions of strict naturalism, the door is open for a theistic understanding of the CSR. I will finally discuss different problems and prospects for a theistic reading of the CSR.

At this point, a few words are needed as to what I will not be arguing for. I will not be arguing for the truth of mainstream Christian theism, but rather I will simply explore what consequences CSR would have for theism as if both were true. By mainstream Christian theism, I mean the view according to which there is a God who is the creator of the physical world and works actively in it to bring about his purposes as well as being omnipotent, omniscient, eternal (or timeless) and morally perfect.21 I will be assuming that such a theistic position is at least coherent and there might be some reasons for holding it. Nor will I be arguing for the truth of current CSR theories, because I believe that we are not currently in a position to make definitive pronouncements regarding the viability of CSR methods and the truth of its theories (the reasons why I think this will become apparent in the course of the book). Someone might say that we have good reasons to think that something like the current theories of CSR must be the case, but I will not be making such an argument here, although I am very sympathetic to it. I will simply aim to show how CSR theories currently work, what they need to assume in order to work, and what they explain (if they are true). Although I will be making some critical points about the CSR in this course of this book, mainly on philosophical grounds, I nevertheless tend to the view that many CSR theories and the general approach are plausible and might very well turn out to be approximating the truth. The structure of the book is as follows. The aim of Chapter 1 is to make explicit the ontological and epistemological commitments of the CSR by comparing its methodology to other approaches in the study of religion. Methodologically speaking, I understand the CSR as an attempt to naturalise the study of religion. The claim is that naturalisation is obtained by adopting a certain kind of materialism and the corresponding idea of scientific explanation as physical-causal explanation. Both of these views contrasts with most (if not all) currently existing approaches to religion. Chapter 2 will then focus on the reasons why CSR writers think that religion is natural in a second sense, that is,
easy to acquire and maintain for beings with human minds and environments. I will describe the main theories and hypotheses of the CSR, focusing mainly on the MCI hypothesis and the ways in which different features of social cognition support religious thinking. The chapter will conclude with an examination of the different meanings of the ‘naturalness of religion’ claim and explore several criticisms directed towards the CSR standard model.

Chapter 3 will expand significantly the themes of Chapter 1 by pushing the philosophical assumptions of CSR to their logical end. My argument is that the some of the CSR assumptions presented in Chapter 1 derive their plausibility from an underlying philosophical view I have already dubbed strict naturalism. Strict naturalism, it will be argued, is based on strong physicalism and physicalist assumptions about causal explanation. This will lead the strict naturalist ultimately to reject all personal, intentional and social explanations unless they can be reduced to physical ones. Strict naturalism also advocates a certain type of reductionism regarding the relationship between scientific disciplines and theories. This in turn is at the heart of the strict naturalist programme of naturalising human and social sciences – a programme that motivates many researchers in CSR as well as others working in evolutionary psychology and related fields.

After outlining the strict naturalist philosophical programme, in Chapter 4 I suggest an alternative, which I call broad naturalism. Broad naturalism, it will be claimed, is compatible with the CSR as it is currently being practised (and maybe even preferable to strict naturalism). This framework jettisons some of the metaphysical baggage of strict naturalism. The physicalist assumptions of strict naturalism are criticised and a new theory of causal explanation is introduced – a theory that is able to maintain the usefulness of explanations given at different levels of science without reducing them. This leads to a certain kind of explanatory pluralism and anti-reductionism in the study of religion. My proposed alternative framework grows out of views that have already been discussed by CSR researchers themselves. This is especially the case with respect to Robert McCauley and his explanatory pluralism which I will be using extensively. The argument put forward in this chapter is that instead of adhering to some robust naturalist metaphysics, such as strict naturalism, we should adopt a more pragmatic approach to explaining religion which would allow different kinds of methodological presuppositions provided that they attempt to answer different kinds of questions.

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Chapter 5 will examine the current state of the discussion regarding the relevance of CSR for theism. I will begin by examining the most commonly used arguments in their various forms as well as the available theist replies. My argument in this chapter is that although there are many relatively successful arguments for the claim that CSR provides little reason for the theist to doubt her theism, the arguments that have been deployed up to the present are far from exhaustive, and suffer from a certain generality. The debate so far has been too general and has tended to understand CSR results in a somewhat simplistic way. Finally, I argue that the explanatory pluralistic model opens the possibility for a theistic version of the cognitive approach. From a theistic perspective, I suggest, the cognitive approach might even be regarded as constructive, especially with respect to discussions concerning the rationality of religion and human natural capacities for religious thinking.