



RCC Distinguished Lecture
Aarhus, February 20, 2012, 15:00-17:00

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From Belfast to Brno, and in Between: The Adventures of an 'AnthroFuturist,' One Hundred Years Beyond Durkheim

In this lecture, I will trace the origins for the Cognitive Science of Religion through the innovation of theories, to the development of large research centers around the world, culminating in arguably the first faculty position named for the discipline at large. In preparation for the one hundredth anniversary of Durkheim's "Elementary Forms," and the conference in Aarhus to celebrate it, I will argue that the Cognitive Science of Religion is now an elaborate effort to connect evolution and culture via a Darwinian methodology for 'social intelligence.' By presenting emerging experimental anthropology being conducted at the Laboratory for the Experimental Research on Religion (LEVYNA) at Masaryk University in Brno, I will advance CSR as complimentary to classical theories of religion, and not as many have proffered as antagonistic. The future, as I suggest, compels researchers to connect culture with the proximate cognitive mechanism, and ultimate evolutionary mechanisms to explain human culture relying on the research paradigms of the past.

William (Lee) W. McCorkle Jr. is an evolutionary and cognitive anthropologist specializing in ritual, language, and communication. He earned his Ph.D. from the Institute of Cognition and Culture at Queen's University in Belfast (UK), one of the world's premiere centers for research in the Cognitive Science of Religion. He has conducted fieldwork in India and Japan and devised experiments to test his original theory on the ritualized disposal of dead bodies by humans. In 2010, Dr. McCorkle authored *Ritualizing the Disposal of the Deceased: From Corpse to Concept* (New York: Peter Lang Inc.) an academic monograph for the Toronto Studies in Religion series. In 2012/13, along with Dr. Dimitris Xygalatas, he will release the edited volume *Mental Culture: Towards a Cognitive Science of Religion* (London: Equinox) featuring many of the leading researchers and theorists in the field of CSR. McCorkle has presented papers for conferences, panels, and invited lectures internationally, and served in both faculty and administrative positions. Currently, he is the Director of Experimental Research for the LEVYNA project (a multi-million euro, externally funded EU based grant on Experimental Anthropology of Religion and Ritual) based in Brno, Czech Republic at Masaryk University. He is also an Associate Professor/Research Specialist in the Department for the Study of Religions at Masaryk University, and, along with Professors Harvey Whitehouse and Luther Martin, Dr. D. Jason Slone, and Dr. Dimitris Xygalatas is an editor for the Cognitive Science of Religion series with Berlin Academic. Dr. McCorkle currently serves as the Treasurer for the International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion (IACSR).

Ritualizing the Disposal of the Deceased traces mortuary behavior from the early fossil record to modern religious contexts in diverse cultural settings. By using archival and ethnographic evidence from Buddhist traditions, the author highlights the disparity between doctrines that contradict actual practices performed by Buddhists themselves. By appealing to the evolved cognitive architecture of human minds, this book argues that ritualized disposal behavior is the by-product of mental systems designed to handle living people. Due to complex social intelligence, humans are compelled to handle dead people in ritualized behaviors and to represent them in counterintuitive ways. The author also examines the professional religious guilds that have taken advantage of these ritualized compulsions over the last several thousand years, by giving and controlling the meanings behind these actions. Furthermore, experimental evidence is given to support this hypothesis, providing the first mature cognitive and evolutionary theory for mortuary behavior by humans.

"William W. McCorkle, Jr. makes a significant contribution to the study of mortuary ritual. *Ritualizing the Disposal of the Deceased* should be essential reading for those interested in explaining this remarkable aspect of human behavior."

Harvey Whitehouse, Professor of Social Anthropology,
Fellow of Magdalen College, University of Oxford

"In this exciting, controversial, and scholarly work, William W. McCorkle, Jr. combines a sophisticated historical knowledge of Buddhism with insights from cognitive and evolutionary psychology, as well as ethnography, to make sense of the widespread practice among humans to ritually dispose of dead bodies in bizarre and unexpected ways. McCorkle punctures claims that Buddhism ignores such practices by producing evidence to the contrary. This book is not only a good read but represents an important moment in the continually developing cognitive science of religion."

E. Thomas Lawson, Editor, Journal of Cognition and Culture

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Toronto Studies in Religion 30

RITUALIZING THE DISPOSAL OF THE DECEASED

From Corpse to Concept



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