

Cognitive Science of Religion and Faith in the West

Abstract: The interview given by Lluís Oviedo, a full Professor for Theological Anthropology at the Pontifical University Antonianum of Rome, and Fundamental Theology at the Theological Institute of Murcia (Spain). He is team member of research group on *Creditions*, based in Graz University (Austria). He edits a book series on “New approaches to the scientific study of religion” (Springer) and the bibliographic bulletin *Reviews in Science, Religion and Theology*. Research interests focus on the dialogue between theology and sciences, including the new scientific study of religion, and more recently to the interaction between religious belief and AI, and to how religious beliefs and behaviors are related to personal and social wellbeing.



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Konrad Szocik: One of your research areas is cognitive and evolutionary science of religion. I wanted to ask you about the attitude of believers, non-scientists, towards this research perspective. What in it might be useful to believers, and in turn, what potential elements might be a threat?

Lluís Oviedo: In my opinion the impact of these new studies on religion is very limited beyond the narrow circle of their practitioners and little more. To start with, my colleagues theologians – who could be more concerned – have largely ignored those developments, as if they were irrelevant for theological research. This is for me wrong, as theology should be more aware and receptive towards every attempt to better understand religion. That said, general believers could find several points of the new scientific study of religion interesting, for instance how many cognitive biases weight in our way to believe; or how much religion is evolving as all other cultural expressions; or how much religion as a culture is entrenched with the general evolutionary process we humans undergo. I myself use sometimes these ideas in my lessons and even in my preaching, to render believers aware about aspects of their faith and life, otherwise hidden to them. Obviously, the greater risk is that religious belief and praxis becomes naturalized, reduced, deprived of transcending and healing strength, and that the scientists could provide an explanation of religion that could become more convincing than traditional ones, and would displace it as something outdated, as several colleagues in that area have already tried.

Konrad Szocik: How do you assess the future of religion globally? To what extent is the weakening of the role of religion in Western culture an exception, and to what extent can we assume that other parts of the world will repeat the fate of religion in the future inherent in Western culture?

Lluís Oviedo: The question regarding the global future of religion can be answered only in a nuanced way, and considering its great complexity. I have been following such declining process in Western societies for more than 30 years, and a surprising thing is that, despite the odds, religion,

and especially Christian faith, resist in a stubborn way in many areas, some of them quite unexpected. I could speak even about post-secularization and revivals when I witnessed in a recent visit to Oxford how full churches from different confessions were, or how many visitors attended the beautiful Church of England Evensongs. This is happening in many places, and appears to many as almost ironical. For instance last August the *New York Times* published an article with the title “New York’s Hottest Club is the Catholic Church” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/09/opinion/nyc-catholicism-dimes-square-religion.html>). Well, something is changing, especially because the minority now attending churches is younger, better formed, and urban; several studies describe this new trend and new books of high intellectual level reflect on the positive value of Christian faith. A possible explanation is that now that attitude is free and less constrained by habitude or social norms; then, many are discovering to what extent faith and religious practice have a positive influence in their lives, provide coping and resilience in adversity; give quality to our relationships and families; and are a factor of personal and social wellbeing. Indeed, hundreds of studies are published each year to indicate that positive effect. This is truly the real and most promising new scientific study of religion.

Konrad Szocik: One of the topics of your research is the influence of religion on the evolution of morality and cooperation. This is undoubtedly a very complex issue. What, in your opinion, was and is the influence of religion on morality? How could religion be useful today for strengthening morality?

Lluis Oviedo: Again, we need to be more subtle. Contrary to some generalist views, not every religious or spiritual form has a prosocial effect. We know in history and in the present many religious forms very little concerned about other’s welfare and focusing just on the one’s own interests and perhaps its immediate niche. I think that just a bunch of religions and religious expressions inside them stress the prosocial dimension or identify their cult with the attention towards to benefit others. Even Christianity has had to struggle along its history to remind its followers about that call and duty, since it does not appear as the religious cognitive default position. That said, yes, I think these evolved religious forms are clearly committed to the task of moralizing, or now better, they contribute to character formation, to human flourishing or to a virtuous life, concepts somehow *démodé* today, but still looked for in many cases, especially when dealing with development of the youngest, and with growing corruption mentality in Western societies.

Konrad Szocik: Public interest in the war between Russia and Ukraine seems to be waning after the initial shock. How do you assess the attitude of Western European societies toward this war? Is it possible to point to any one dominant approach? And, in your opinion, are there any significant differences in thinking about this war between intellectuals and academics on the one hand, and lay people on the other?

Lluis Oviedo: I think that the dominant attitude in Europe is against war and for peace. However, such rejection of war assumes later a political tone and divides the public: for a sector – I think still the biggest – peace can be achieved only after deterring the aggressor efforts, and so supporting in every way the victim party and its resistance; for the other, peace can be achieved only through a reduced military support to the victims of aggression, so to constrain them to seat down and negotiate. The difference is between those who think that arming one side is not the best way to stop the war, and that a compromise or settlement is desired and expected. I do not have figures that allow me to answer to the other question, about differences between intellectuals and other people, I am afraid. I expect intellectuals to be more nuanced and less emotionally driven, better informed and aware of how complex these processes are, but I am not sure in this case. Even the idea of moral sensitivity could favor both tendencies. This is clearly an unsettled issue.