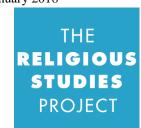## Autism, Religion and Imagination

Podcast with **Ingela Visuri** (5 February 2018).

Interviewed by **Thomas J. Coleman III**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/autism-religion-and-imagination/

Thomas Coleman (**TC**): *Welcome to the Religious Studies Project. My name is [Thomas Coleman](#) and today I have the pleasure of speaking with a doctoral student at Södertörn and Gavle Universities, Miss [Ingela Visuri](#), who is conducting some fascinating multi-method research, which I suspect is going to change the way Cognitive Science of Religion conceptualises the relationship between individuals on the autism spectrum and belief, or lack thereof, in supernatural agents. Ingela, welcome to the Religious Studies Project.*

Ingela Visuri (**IV**): Thanks Tommy, I'm so happy to be here.

TC: *Good. I was hoping you could start by telling us, briefly, about how your research began and then we will jump straight into some general questions, and end with a more detailed account of your current research.*

IV: Right. So I was always very interested in empathy and role-taking while I was at university doing my basic courses. And after graduating I started working in schools, teaching religious education which is a non-confessional subject here in Sweden. And by coincidence I was recruited to this special educational department with pupils who are on the autism spectrum. And at that time it was just called Asperger's syndrome, which is high functioning autism. And I had a pupil there at this department who was a member of a Pentecostal congregation. He used to ask me questions about glossolalia and he didn't really understand why he didn't speak in tongues. And also, he had had teachers who were religious and they had told him that God used to speak to them, and told him a lot of different things. So one day this pupil said, "You know, sometimes I think that God might be talking to everyone else

but me." And, for me, this was the moment when my research actually began. Because I immediately came to think of theories about how people use their empathy to communicate with invisible agents. And this was before I was acquainted with the Cognitive Science of Religion. But already in the fifties, in Social Psychology, there were such discussions which I knew about. So I decided first to write a Master's thesis trying to explore how individuals who do have autism, but also have religion or spirituality in their lives, how does communication work for them with theses invisible agents? And this was how I slipped into the Cognitive field, discovering that there were a lot of interesting theories that could be useful.

TC: *Very cool. So you have mentioned specifically the autism spectrum, or I think we'll call it the autism spectrum continuum. What is that, for listeners? I wondered if you could give us a brief description.*

IV: I would say that autism is a different type of cognition, and it's really a collection of symptoms. So, for instance, there are difficulties in the intuitive understanding of social communication and there's also unusual sensory processing in individuals with autism. Just to exemplify, people who don't have autism are typically unaware of automatically responding to social cues that are really subtle, such as reading facial expressions, or interpreting the intonation when speaking to people, or drawing information from body language. But for autistic people this doesn't happen intuitively or automatically. And I think it's important to understand that people who are high functioning and autistic, they are able to compensate by using their intelligence and verbal ability. So they may learn how to do it, but it takes a lot of effort because these responses are not automated.

TC: *So, just summarising here – if I understand correctly – that individuals on the spectrum aren't lacking cognitions per se, but they go about thinking about the world – and particularly other people – in a little bit different way than we neuro-typicals might . . . your average person.*

IV: Exactly. And I also think it's important . . . in autism studies there's an ongoing debate on the role of sensory perception (**5:00**). And I think this has been very much overlooked in the Cognitive Science of Religion when we're discussing autism. And so, for instance, autistic people might be hypo- or hyper-sensitive to different social input and this differs a lot between people. And it also differs between senses; it can fluctuate. And there also seems to be difficulties in the synchronisation of multi-modal input. And I think this is also crucial when we're trying to understand how autistic people experience the world.

TC: *An example of multimodal input would be, like, listening to someone and watching them as they're speaking as well. Just to give some examples.*

IV: Exactly. So watching a movie, for instance, would be a multimodal experience, while reading a book is a unimodal experience.

TC: *Now why have Cognitive Scientists of Religion been interested in individuals on the spectrum?*

IV: Well, cognitive researchers who depart from what is called the "naturalness hypothesis of religion", they have expected that social abilities such as mind reading or theory of mind – as it's also called at times – that this is what underpins belief in superhuman agents. So to figure out what gods or ghosts or ancestors want, you need to sort-of think of their mind in a similar way as when you're thinking about agency in any person, right? But with autism there's a case of mind reading difficulties. And number of scholars had expected that autistic people may not be able to mentalise or believe in invisible agents. But for me it was a little bit different, because I had this teaching experience. And I couldn't really see any difference in my different classrooms – because I was teaching autistic pupils certain days and non-autistic pupils on other days. And I couldn't really see any difference between how many religious or spiritual pupils there would be in these groups, or how many were, you know, really disinterested or atheistically oriented. So what I did was, I decided to turn the question around. And I wanted to explore how individuals who do experience differences in social communication, why do they still engage in invisible relations? Right? Why do they keep on reading invisible minds if mind reading would be so difficult for them? Right?

TC: *Right.*

IV: So this was a starting point for the PhD thesis that I'm now working on.

TC: *Fascinating. So you had some suspicions that, maybe, the current the state of the field in CSR, as it related to the autism spectrum, might be incomplete. And I was hoping, I guess, that we could get into how some of your research perhaps challenges and informs some of this past theory. And, I guess we'll add, there hasn't been much work done on individuals on the spectrum within the cognitive science of religion.*

IV: Right. And the previous research has been quantitative, and hypotheses that people are testing on large groups. But I decided to design an explorative study using mixed methods. And I'm also aiming to work a bit like an anthropologist, because I think that all new fields of research – we need this phase

before we move onto testing hypotheses, right? We need to explore the field. And what I'm doing, I'm using my participants as experts, because I'm not autistic, right? So I can never experience the world form an autistic perspective. So I need them to help me get insights into what's happening. So, for instance, I let them prepare their own interviews. This is to minimise my own impact on the material. And also, when I'm formulating my own hypotheses I discuss – with both my participants and also other people that I know that are on the spectrum – if they think that this makes sense to them. Because if it doesn't make sense to them, then it's probably not right.

TC: *Right*

IV: And my finding so far is that, my participants in this study, they do really think of their preferred superhuman agents in relational terms. So there seems to be a lot of mind reading going on in thinking why these agents cause certain things to happen, or what these agents think of one's behaviour, like (**10:00**): "Is this a good thing to do, or is it a bad thing to do?" And you would feel what God wants, for instance.

TC: *So I was hoping you could also maybe discuss some of the narratives that some of your participants have shared with you, and how do they relate or contrast with the previous theory?*

IV: Well, for instance, I have an example from my participant who calls himself John. And he calls himself a spiritual Christian. And when I asked him if there was a specific starting point for his current view of life he told me – this a quote from the interview: "I think it has developed because I . . . . It kind-of happened a couple of times, that if I did something that felt morally right or something, I felt like I got quite happy, and I got energised, and it kind-of felt like the world was more with me. It's like something agreed with what I did and said, 'That's good,' and gave me pat on the shoulder and kind-of: 'You did something right.' And that, I think, developed into me doing something according to God." And I think this is also an interesting example, because it begins with an emotion, an experience, and that developed into what he perceives to be God.

TC: *Fascinating. So how, then, does some of this research perhaps pose new questions for the field to follow up on, with more anthropological, ethnographic research as well as quantitative and perhaps experimental?*

IV: Well, I think to begin with I would like to challenge this previous supposition that we need intuitive mentalising skills for interpreting superhuman agents. And I actually think that when autistic

people get rid of bodies it helps mentalising. Because you have both the automated, quick responses and then you have the slower, more reflective responses. And despite lacking the intuitive responses they use their reflective mentalising skills to think of what these agents want. And it helps that they don't have any facial expressions, they don't have any body language, they don't need to interpret any intonation. And there's also an emotional coherence in invisible agents that you don't get in ordinary people.

TC: *How so?*

IV: Well, people who are non-autistic, we are quite good at hiding our emotions.

TC: *I have to disagree. No, just kidding. Of course, of course!* (Laughs)

IV: (Laughs) If you spend time with autistic people you'll notice that they are very straightforward and they tell you what's going on. Which also gets them into trouble because we're not expected to be that straightforward. We're expected to be, you know, lying a little bit here and there. But these kind of lies in terms of body language are really confusing for autistic people. So if I'm really annoyed with you, for instance, I still want you to like me so I'm trying to hide that I'm annoyed and trying to behave . . .

TC: *Is that what's going on here? (Laughs) No, just kidding*.

IV: No, Tommy! But for autistic people they able to feel what other people feel, but it's difficult to understand what other people are thinking. So this discrepancy between emotional and cognitive input is really confusing. This is also something you get rid of in superhuman agents that are bodiless.

TC: *So is it almost a limiting of distractions: that bodiless agents perhaps make it easier – I think you're suggesting – to interact with?*

IV: Exactly. I think. And I'm not suggesting that autistic people would be more or less religious. That's not my point. But what my study shows is that people who have both autism and religion or spirituality in their lives, for them it seems to be easier to think of a mind when you don't have any bodies. That messes up communication (**15:00**). And it's pretty much the same if you're communicating with a friend over the internet. It's easier because you don't have a body, right? And also, because you have a lot of time to think about what the other person means and you also have time to formulate a proper response. You don't get that in real life interaction, because it's quite fast and quick, because we're expecting people to have these intuitive skills.

TC: *And many people on the spectrum actually prefer kind-of remote or internet-type communication, is that correct?*

IV: Yes. That's correct.

IV: *I guess precisely because it's lacking in some of the more embodied features that we use, on an everyday basis, to understand other people.*

IV: Exactly. And I was actually asking – this is an example of my anthropological method, if you would call it that – I was hanging out on a sofa one day in one of these schools – because I've been spending a lot time with my participants and other pupils in their schools – and I notice that autistic people generally, in Sweden, they're really good at speaking English. And I asked a group of pupils, "How come the autistic people seem to be so much better at speaking English?" And one guy, he said that, "For us it's so much easier to interact with people online, and therefore we become gamers. And gamers interact in English. And that's why we become better." Right?

TC: *Now, how does this open up perhaps some new directions for researching religion and non-religion in neuro-typicals? Because, as I understand it, your work primarily concerns individuals on the spectrum but it also, of course, has implications for people who are not on the spectrum.*

IV: Yes. So first, when it comes to mentalising, cognitive research on mentalising, I think it's important to think of that as a complex construct. It's like a toolbox with different instruments that we can use in different manners. So first we have this difference between fast and intuitive processes, that I've been talking a lot about, and the slow and reflective processing. And then there is also the difference between emotional and cognitive empathy. So we sort-of have to elaborate with all these different mentalising aspects.

TC: *Could I ask for an example between cognitive and more emotional empathy for our listeners? How are the two different?*

IV: Yes. The emotional empathy is feeling what other people are feeling. So, for instance, if someone is sad you would become affected by that sadness, right? But the cognitive empathy is more in the head, so to speak. So for instance, if you're nodding you would know that someone is still listening to you or you know you just get these little cues. Or someone's frowning, for instance, then you can interpret that this is an emotional response going on. But it's more in the cognitive level.

TC: *Alright. And so then, how does this distinction relate to individuals on the spectrum and off the spectrum and belief in supernatural agents?*

IV: Well I think . . . and my point is that this is for both autistic and non-autistic individuals. I think that we need to acknowledge that people use reflected thinking a lot more than has been expected in the Cognitive Science of Religion. For instance, non-autistic people might have intuitions about supernatural agency, but if you're living in Sweden, for instance, it's not the norm to be religious. We have a rather secular norm, so that means that you might discard your intuitions and search for another explanation. But also, in autistic people, I don't really see that it should affect them so much that these intuitive responses are not there. Because they use these slow processes instead.

TC: *So they're not lacking the intuiting, certainly, but perhaps they're a little bit different. And therefore they rely more on reflective-type thinking. As I understand, you've also crept into some interesting avenues with your research having to do with fantasy. I think you touched on imagination earlier. I was wondering if you could further elucidate how those might play into religiosity or non-religiosity, for those individuals on the spectrum* (**20:00**).

IV: Well something that surprised me in my results was the majority of my autistic participants turned out to be fantasy-prone. And some of these fantasy-prone people, they're gamers and some of them love fantasy fiction. But what's common for all of them is that they switch between different realities. So they have their empirical reality which is quite fragmented and difficult and exhausting. And then they create their own imaginary realities which they switch into. And I suspect this is a kind of coping mechanism. So they create – with the help of their imagination – really interesting worlds that they fill with characters that might be influenced from religion and spirituality, but also fantasy fiction and popular culture. It could even be artists, you know, pop stars for instance. And they have these worlds, and they interact with all these characters in a sense that reminds me a lot about how cognitive research describes interaction with superhuman agents.

TC: *Really? Ok.*

IV: So I think this is something that we need to look into. That if mentalising is used, and it's a non-human agent, I think that's equivalent to the study of gods and spirits and ancestors, which is more traditional. And I also think this is relevant for younger generations. This is something really interesting to look into.

Podcast Transcript

TC: *I know on the Religious Studies Project we usually pride ourselves in challenging traditional conceptualisations of the category of religion. And of course, supernatural agents as well. And what I'm hearing is that some of your work does just that, as well as, perhaps, the Cognitive Science of Religion in general. And I think we can certainly expect it to open up some exciting new avenues for religious agents as they are traditionally understood: perhaps, maybe, the magic of Harry Potter; or massive multi-player online gaming; and all these other types of fantastical imaginative agents that people seem to engage with on a daily basis, but perhaps don't think of as religious or spiritual.*

IV: I totally agree with you and, for instance, one of my participants who describes himself as a Christian, he also says that he's totally into Harry Potter. And until he was 14 years old, he literally believed that there were unicorns. And now that he's older he says that, "Well, I don't believe in them in the ontological sense any more, but they're still with me and I fantasise a lot about them. And when I'm fantasising it becomes real for me." And I think this is also something that we risk missing out on, if we don't do these explorative studies, if we just hold onto scales and questionnaires that have always been used. Because many of my participants might describe themselves . . . well, you know. It's not that they believe in God and they don't go to Church, but they still experience a lot of interesting things that they interpret: it's spirits; or ghosts; or demons; or then you have these fictional characters, as well, that they interact with on a daily basis.

TC: *And it seems like an even further challenge to the notion of belief: what it means to believe, or whether belief is important – as we often think it is – if there are all these various other imaginative fantasy religious agents that perhaps people wouldn't say that they believe in per se, but interact with, engage with perhaps emotionally, in a number of manners. So it's very interesting. So, just wrapping up here, I was hoping, if you felt we had left anything out of this podcast, or if you had any closing words, or some take-away points for the listeners: anything else you'd like to discuss with us today about your researching the field.*

IV: I think I would like to return to your previous comment. I think that when we're researching belief it's very easy to end up in these ontological categories (**25:00**). It's like a statement: is it true? Is it not? It's like a number of things that you need to sort-of hold on to or reject. But this is not interesting for the people that I have interviewed. They start from their own experience. And I think the body's important here: that you feel, you know, that you have a sensed presence of a ghost, for instance. And these sensed presences they turn into some kind of notion of what's going on in invisible agency. But they don't depart from, you know, thinking; "Is it true, or is it not, that there are ghosts?" Because it's

not interesting for them, because they experience them. So I think that *experience* is the really interesting analytical category that we could use a lot more in the Cognitive Science of Religions.

TC: *Awesome. I think that's a good note to end on. Ingela Visuri thank you very much for joining us today on the Religious Studies Project.*

IV: Thanks Tommy.

TC: I want to remind our listeners, be sure to check out some of the previous podcasts that are closely related to today's topics. I'll include some links in the description, such as interviews with Dr Will Gervais, on God's Mind, Your Mind, and Theory of Mind, and also with Dr Stuart Guthrie on Religion as Anthropomorphism. So thank you all for listening.

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